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Positive Evaluations May Be Shortlived: On Outcomes and Processes of a World Bank Biodiversity Project in a Post-Communist Country

Maria Falaleeva, Felix Rauschmayer

“Multi-level Governance of Natural Resources: Tools and Processes for Water and Biodiversity Governance in Europe” (GoverNat)

Objectives

The **overall objective** of GoverNat is to develop new solutions for multi-level environmental governance and to facilitate their use by decision makers in an enlarged EU. The **central research objective** is to test the hypothesis that certain participatory processes and analytical decision tools are particularly useful for improving multi-level environmental governance. **Specific research objectives** therefore address the enhanced understanding of multi-level governance of natural resources, the development of methods of public and stakeholder participation to be used in such contexts, the effective utilisation of specific analytical decision tools in multi-level governance, and the reflective evaluation of such use. These four tasks are necessarily interdisciplinary. The **central training objective** is to give 9 doctoral and 3 post-doctoral fellows an interdisciplinary training 1) in research on environmental governance, particularly of biodiversity and water, in Europe, and 2) in designing legitimate and effective solutions for communication between policy makers, scientists and the public in science/policy interfaces.

Consortium

1. UFZ – Helmholtz-Centre for Environmental Research, Germany (F. Rauschmayer);
2. ECOMAN - Ecological Economics and Management, Lisbon, Portugal (P. Antunes);
3. NERI - Danish Environmental Research Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark (M. S. Andersen);
4. SRI - Sustainable Research Institute, Leeds, United Kingdom (J. Paavola);
5. ICTA – Institute for Environmental Science and Technology, Barcelona, Spain (S. van den Hove);
6. CSWM – Centre for the Sustainable Water Management, Lancaster, United Kingdom (W. Medd);
7. UStutt - Institute for Sociology, Stuttgart, Germany (O. Renn);
8. IF - Institute of Forecasting, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovak Republic (T. Kluvánková-Oravská);
9. IELM-SIU - St. Istvan University, Budapest, Hungary (G. Pataki);
10. IREAS - Institute for Structural Policy, Slovak Republic (V. Chobotova).

Characteristics

- EU Marie Curie Research Training Network with 9 doctoral and 3 post-doc fellows
- Duration: 4 years (10/06 – 9/10)
 - Doctoral fellows: 4/07-6/10
 - Post-docs: 7/07-1/10
- 10 partners and several praxis affiliates in 9 European countries
- Coordination: Helmholtz-Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ (Dr. Felix Rauschmayer)
- Total contribution of European Commission: 2.4 Mio €
- Links water and biodiversity, participation and decision tools in a governance perspective

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**Positive Evaluations May Be Shortlived: On Outcomes and Processes of a
World Bank Biodiversity Project in a Post-Communist Country**

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Abstract:

International aid projects in post-communist countries were meant to support the existing systems of environmental protection during the transition period and also to introduce new standards of environmental governance. This paper looks at the role project evaluations can play in fulfilling these goals. While the outcomes of the World Bank project in the Belavezhskaya Pushcha national park in Belarus were evaluated positively after its (delayed) completion, an evaluation using the same criteria 10 years later challenges the long-term effectiveness of the project. Evaluating the implementation *process*, we see three interlinked reasons for this failure which can be generalized with regard to environmental governance in many post-communist countries even now: the predominance of the natural sciences, an unbalanced representation of the actors, and little knowledge regarding participatory methods. In order to introduce new standards for environmental governance, international aid projects should use ongoing *project* and, in particular, *process* evaluation as a tool to support communication between the donor organizations and the implementing agencies on the one hand and between the different actors in the receiving countries on the other.

1. Introduction

During the last few decades, environmental policymaking in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe has been through some significant transformations (Andonova, 2002; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004; Hutcheson and Korosteleva, 2006). After the collapse of the previous system of governance and of economic and social structures in the 1980-90s, some countries joined the European Union (EU) and others entered the sphere of the EU Neighbourhood Policy (Dodini and Fantini, 2006). In addition, due to the increasing number of international environmental obligations, new political conditions caused the objectives of the environmental policy makers to be extended far beyond domestic problems and institutions. National environmental management practices needed to be reconsidered and brought into line with European and international standards (Andonova, 2002; Hallstrom, 2004; Hicks, 2004; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004).

Twenty years of experience have demonstrated that there are significant difficulties in implementing new environmental policies and standards in Eastern Europe (Connoly et al, 1996; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004; Andonova, 2002). The environmental authorities - traditionally less powerful than economic development administrations - often lack the necessary financial support and expertise to fulfil their obligations, which includes implementing complex and expensive policies. With their limited capacity for innovation, the authorities often tend to use readily available approaches traditionally based on natural science and technical expertise (Wolchik, 1991; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004). At the same time, international organizations often tend to overlook and underestimate the importance of local conditions – traditions of governance and scientific research, low social capital and so forth – while trying to apply ready-to-use practices and standards developed for the Western democracies (VanDeveer and Dabelko, 2001; Gutner, 2002; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004; Hallstrom, 2004; Hicks, 2004; Hutcheson and Korosteleva, 2006).

The role of international organizations in capacity building and bridging national practices and international standards has been widely discussed in the relevant literature (Keohane, 1996; Fairmann and Ross, 1996; Gutner, 2002 and 2005; Sagar and VanDeveer, 2005). Although numerous potential benefits and high expectations are associated with the intervention of international donor agencies in domestic environmental policymaking, critics of past and existing implementations agree that this potential largely remains unrealized (Gutner, 2002; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004). Potential sources of implementation problems may lie within the sphere of operation of international organizations as well as in local implementers, third parties and in the external conditions (Derviş et al, 1995; Keohane, 1996; VanDeveer and Dabelko, 2001).

In the late 1990s, the analysts of international aid projects admitted that there was a necessity to undertake further observation of project results over a sustained period of time – normally between 10 and 20 years (Fairman and Ross, 1996). It is now possible to draw some initial conclusions about the effectiveness of pilot international initiatives conducted in the post-communist states. Nevertheless, very little reflection has taken place on the lessons learned. The reasons for this may be, on the one hand, a lack of domestic interest or capacity on the part of natural science-oriented scholars to engage in scientific reflections on long-term project effectiveness, including social and policy aspects. On the other hand, participatory and environmental governance issues in Central and Eastern Europe have still been significantly understudied by the Western research community.

In this paper we aim to contribute towards filling this gap by analyzing the implementation of the World Bank project in Belavezhskaya Pushcha national park in Belarus (1992-1997). To conduct this analysis, we first develop a conceptual understanding of the implementation and evaluation

of international aid projects. We then apply our conceptualization and compare the project outcome after project completion with the current situation and evaluate the process *ex-post*.

Comparing the project results with the existing situation shows that, although significant outcomes have been achieved in the short run, the long-term effectiveness of the project is very poor or even negative. The responses and background studies - documents, proceedings and internet forums - give rise to the conclusion that the poor long-term effectiveness of the project was caused to a great extent by the lack of understanding between the international organization and local implementers. Comparing outcome and process evaluation (Rauschmayer et al. 2009), we identify the factors overlooked by the implementers which, in the longer run, had significant detrimental effects on project effectiveness. We stress the importance of evaluation and monitoring as instruments for reflecting on past experience and for ongoing implementation and argue that continuous project evaluation and monitoring can be used as a tool for identifying and limiting potential problem sources.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the role of international organizations as standard setters for environmental decision making and the role of project evaluation as a communication tool for international and local partners. The case study description gives information about the World Bank project in Belavezhszkaya Pushcha and the present situation in the national park. The section following that compares the results of outcome and process evaluation, and analyzes how local and international partners perceived the project implementation; it also puts our case into the wider context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The last section concludes the paper.

2. Introducing new standards in CEE countries through international aid projects – a bridge with a gap?

From the beginning of the 1990s, following the collapse of the communist system, a number of international actors entered the CEE countries in order to assist the processes of transformation. International organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, EU, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (ERBD) and many further governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations played a significant role and influenced the process of designing and implementing national environmental strategies (Derviş et al, 1995; Connolly et al, 1996; DEPA, 1998; Carmin and VanDeveer, 2004).

The influence of international agencies was conveyed through two “channels”: first, by providing *financial aid* and, second, by setting *new standards* in project implementation and policy and technical advice (Derviş et al, 1995; Connolly et al, 1996; Carmin and VanDeveer, 2004). In the unfavourable economic situation that followed the crisis of social and economic systems in the post-communist states, financial aid became an important source of funding for a range of state activities (Keohane, 1996). Whether it was intended or not, the selection of initiatives to be financed and the distribution of funds had a power-shifting effect. Identifying priorities and, in particular, recipients of the aid became an important and often unexpected challenge for the international agencies unfamiliar with local conditions and power distribution (World Bank, 1998; 2001).

Introducing standards represents a more “strategic” means of influence. The aim of adopting benchmarks applied by the international community (supposedly represented by the international organizations) is to build a bridge between national practices and international procedures. The standards can be divided into two groups: those relating to *outcomes* (e.g. quality of environment, measures taken, project reporting, etc.), and those relating to *processes* (effective organization

and management, adequate representation of different groups, interests, knowledge and information, etc.). While deviations from standards relating to outcome are relatively easy to recognize, standards for processes and deviations therefrom are rather difficult to monitor objectively. The process standards are likely to be very sensitive to subjective factors, such as understanding and interpretation of what a “good” process means for different parties involved (Webler and Tuler, 2006). Yet experience shows that while the Eastern European scientific and policy community has accepted quite readily the outcome-related goals and indicators, the international agencies and their CEE partners had quite a different understanding with regard to the process standards, including rather more flexible and vague objectives such as fair and competent organization (cf. World Bank, 2001). However, one critical issue raised in analyses of the early technical assistance projects is that the foreign agencies often tended to ignore the actual reasons underlying the performance of local partners. Instead, international agencies tended to “focus on concrete and obvious (to donors) expressions of incapacity such as the absence of certain technologies or the failure to perform specific functions” (Grindle, 1997; Carmin and VanDeveer, 2004). Several recent studies stress the unbalanced nature of the approach taken by donor agencies when they see local partners as mere recipients of “western” standards and practices, while the actual value and suitability of these standards for the local conditions are ignored (Carmin and VanDeveer, 2004; Sagar and VanDeveer, 2005). Poor reflection on past experiences and a lack of institutional coordination between the partners are mentioned among the factors detrimental to mutual learning, a situation that, in turn, leads to deficiencies in the implementation and sustainability of international assistance projects (VanDeveer and Dabelko, 2001; Sagar and VanDeveer, 2005). In other words, the “bridge” between international and national standards seems in many cases to have a gap in the middle.

Nevertheless, numerous positive examples of cooperation between international organizations and CEE partners in areas such as policy development, water, air, and biodiversity protection

show that well-tailored programs can make significant positive changes even with limited investments (Gutner, 2002). Thus, the key questions that both international and local managers need to tackle are: How to make sure that the process is fit for the purpose and investments are effective and secure? How to select the “right” targets and partners for a multi-party process? Does the problem lie in the project design or in poor implementation of a good design?

Project evaluation: reflection, learning, communication

Evaluation and monitoring represent important instruments for reflecting on a project’s effectiveness, failures and achievements (Edgren, 2004; Taut 2007), improving communications (Farell et al, 2001) and stimulating institutional learning (Engel and Carlsson, 2002). Transparent and well-designed evaluation is increasingly referred to as an integral part of effective project management and planning (Margoluis and Salafsky, 1998; Stem et al, 2005) and an important part of capacity building within international aid initiatives (Sagar and VanDeveer, 2005). Identifying and communicating the successes and failures of completed projects and of ongoing implementation processes may create a common understanding of what “successes” and “failures” actually are, whether the parties involved have common aims, and whether they share the need for an increase in efficiency.

Summarizing current approaches to evaluation and monitoring of environmental and biodiversity management projects, Stem and colleagues (2005) highlight three main functions of monitoring and evaluation: (1) to provide external and internal accountability and to demonstrate the project’s impact; (2) to reflect on how well the selected strategy is working and to identify the conditions which may enhance or impede implementation; 3) to provide an early warning system and to plan actions to prevent problems. A complicated task in any circumstances, the implementation of these functions in international initiatives faces additional challenges due to the differences in problem framing and communications between the parties. These differences,

related to factors of a cultural and political nature, may either be explicit or remain unperceived and may create both obstacles as well as opportunities for the project.

In order to analyze the links between project evaluation and mutual understanding between the parties we draw on the broader debate on the development and interpretation of environmental assessments. Describing environmental assessments as a “communicative process” rather than “reports that they often produce”, Farrell and colleagues (2001) stress the importance of “perceptual lenses” reflecting the respective worldviews and determining underlying assumptions of the parties involved and procedures used. For successful communication, the parties need to share basic “perceptual lenses” (e.g. evaluation methods and criteria) or, at least, to be aware of the “lenses” the other parties are applying. Taking into account the diversity of actors and views, absolute agreement on the “perceptual lenses” seems to be rare. International projects add an extra layer of complication due to the differences between international and local partners regarding standards, expectations and related evaluation criteria or, in other words, their impressions about “what is good and what is bad implementation”. Therefore, effective evaluation needs to build upon a comprehensive system of flexible criteria that enable aspects of reality within and beyond the “lenses” of each actor to become visible and an appreciation of what is important to the other partners involved to be developed.

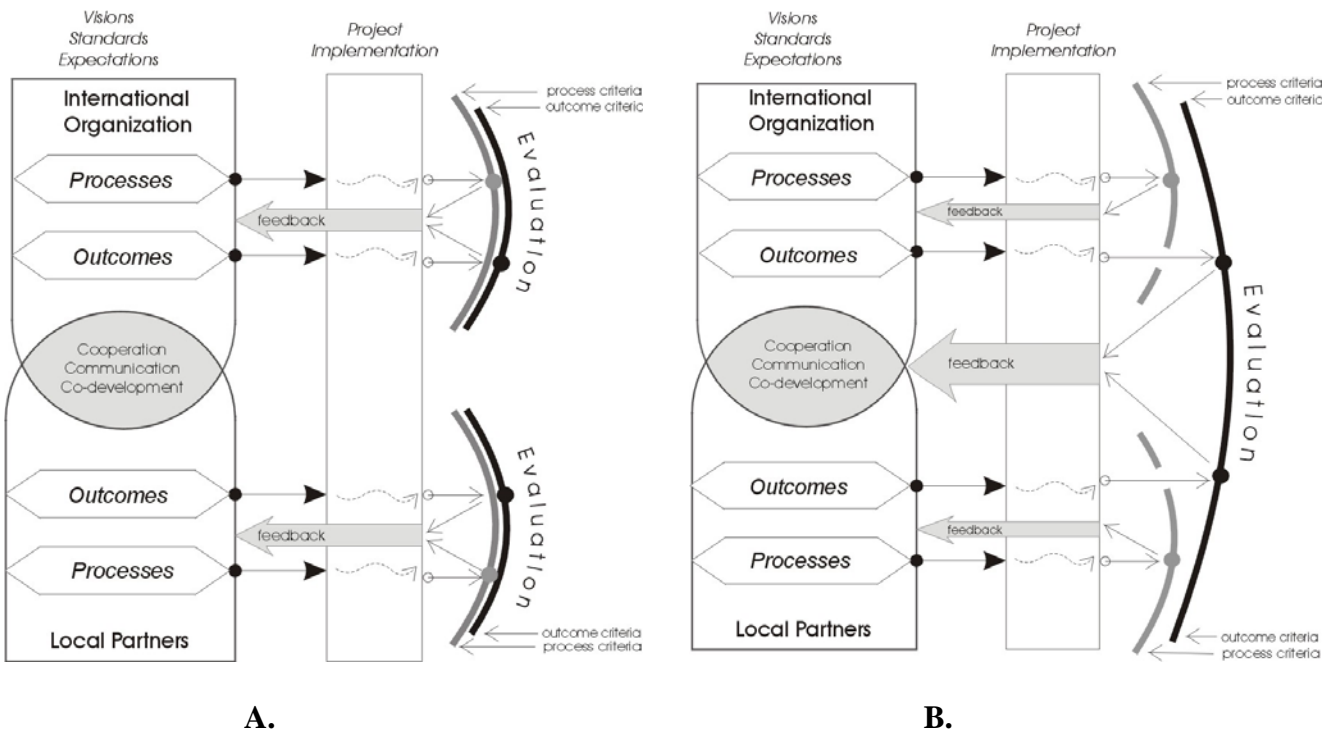
The mission of international organizations as standard setters for outcomes and processes of environmental management can be closely connected with the debate on two types of policy and project evaluation, namely ‘outcome’ and ‘process’ evaluation (Rauschmayer et al, 2009). The former, more traditional and current form of evaluation is often based on quantitative criteria and indicators; it is aimed explicitly at reporting the project results and is widely used in communication and policy processes. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition that outcome evaluations are unable to take account of the social and environmental complexities of

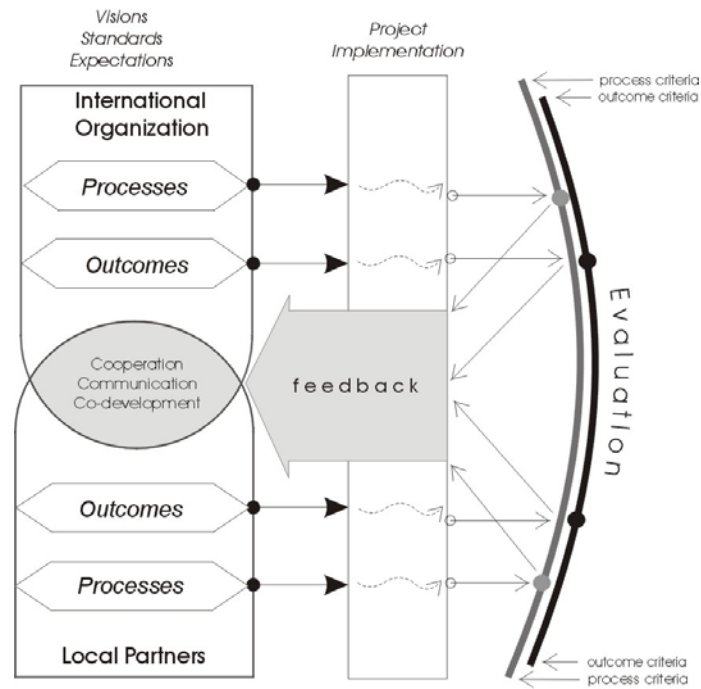
environmental initiatives and fail to provide an adequate picture of project realities and lessons to be learned (Ferraro and Pattanayak, 2006). At the same time, there is an increasing number of studies reflecting on the social processes behind the implementation procedures, as well as frameworks and criteria for analyzing and evaluating the effectiveness of these processes (Stirling, 2005; Weaver et al, 2006; Burgess and Chilvers, 2006; Blackstock et al, 2007; Dietz et al, 2008). It is obvious, however, that process evaluation provides a significant management and communication challenge because the criteria for the “good” decision making and implementation process are difficult to define (see, for example, Renn et al, 1995; O’Neill, 2001) and they depend highly on the actors’ “perceptual lenses”.

Whether explicitly (e.g. based on specific evaluation criteria) or implicitly (e.g. following their idea of common sense), the actors involved in the project often combine outcome and process evaluations when reflecting on project implementation and results. Drawing on the discussion above, we suggest that both outcome and process evaluations have their advantages and limitations. The approach of combining different perceptual lenses in terms of different approaches (e.g. outcomes and process) applied by different actors (e.g. international organizations, local partners or third parties) is likely to provide the most comprehensive picture of the project implementation. A clear definition and communication of the perceptual lenses - e.g. through evaluation criteria and methods - to the other parties is likely to advance mutual understanding.

Figure 1 offers a graphic representation of different evaluation systems used in an international project. In the first scheme A, both international organizations and local partners act in the project according to their own standards for the outcomes and the process and use their own “lenses” to reflect on and interpret the results. In this case, the feedback is likely to be shared by a group that has the same “lenses” without affecting the area of mutual cooperation. For example, the

standards delivered by the international organization are unlikely to affect the mind sets of the local implementers, and the latter's understanding of local specificities is likely to be limited by the frames and assumptions predetermined by the evaluation techniques. In the second case *B*, the parties partially share their evaluation standards, for example having the same yardstick for the outcomes and different ones to reflect on the processes. The feedback on the outcomes achieved is likely to affect the area of mutual cooperation; however, there is still no agreement on the processes behind the successes and failures of the implementation. The last figure *C* shows the situation where both parties adopt a common system to reflect on both the process and the outcomes, which can potentially provide the most effective feedback to the cooperation process.





C.

Figure 1: **Process and outcome evaluation as “perception lenses” reflecting reality for different groups of partners (source: Created by the authors):**

- A. - different criteria for outcomes and processes for the local and international partners
- B. - different criteria for processes and similar for outcomes
- C. - similar criteria for outcomes and processes for the local and international partners

In this paper we argue that it is necessary to have a balanced structure for the evaluation process, that is, one that combines shared outcome and process-oriented evaluations, in order to provide an adequate picture of project implementation. In the context of international aid initiatives, this is particularly important because such balanced evaluation, first, makes it possible to create a comprehensive picture of the local specificities influencing project implementation (e.g. balance of representation of different stakeholder groups, patterns of knowledge accumulation and use, power distribution, etc.) and, second, to enhance communication between the actors by identifying and minimizing unavoidable differences in the perception of project objectives and methods. Our case study exemplifies how neglecting these principles – e.g. not having a structured and transparent system of process evaluation and related feedback – may lead to the

failure of the intended objective of bridging local and international practices and to a low level of effectiveness of investments in the longer term.

In the following we analyze the World Bank project aimed at enhancing capacity for biodiversity governance in Belarus. We do this by comparing the results of formal outcome-oriented self-evaluation undertaken by the project team with the process-oriented evaluation based on the four groups of criteria (Wittmer et al, 2006, Rauschmayer et al, 2006), namely:

- *integration of knowledge and information* (considering environmental and social complexity, different types of information and uncertainties);
- *supporting legitimacy* (compatibility with the existing regulations, actors' accountability, representation of different groups, transparency of rules and assumptions to insiders and outsiders);
- *promoting social dynamics* (supporting relationships and respect between the actors; providing space for learning and exchanging perspectives; balancing empowerment of different groups; facilitating convergence and illustrating diversity);
- *cost-effectiveness* of the measures taken.

This system of criteria has been further developed by the EU projects IBEFish and GoverNat¹ and represents one possible example which could be applied in a combined evaluation (cf. Rauschmayer et al, 2009). As a result of this analysis, we identify several factors which significantly undermined the project implementation and its sustainability and which were overlooked by the outcome-oriented evaluation conducted by the partners.

¹ See Varjopuro et al, 2008 and Berghöfer et al, 2008 enframing a special issue of Marine Policy on the IBEFish, and www.governat.eu for information on the GoverNat project.

3. Case Study: The World Bank project in the “Belavezhskaya Pushcha” national park, Belarus

The Belavezhskaya Pushcha national park (BPNP) is a transboundary nature reserve covering approximately 120 000 ha in Belarus and 87 600 ha in Poland. The ecosystem of coniferous and broad-leaved lowland forests has remained undisturbed over centuries and possesses a unique landscape and biological diversity (Luchkov et al, 1997; Martsinkevich et al, 2004) that provide valuable material for scientific research at both national and international levels. Apart from providing ecosystem services for larger areas in Europe, Belavezhskaya Pushcha has significant symbolic meaning as a natural and cultural heritage of the Belarusian nation. The area supports the livelihoods of the local population through multiple land use and economic activities: harvesting forest products, hunting, agriculture, and tourism including game hunting. The national park is the biggest employer in the area, making the local population highly dependent on the national park’s resources as well as on its management by the administration.

One of the oldest protected forests in Europe (hunting reserve established in 1541), the Belavezhskaya Pushcha has been subject to various forms of protection throughout its history as a part of Poland, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and Belarus. The last transformation from State Hunting Ground (a special kind of nature reserve) to State National Park at the beginning of the 1990s introduced changes in the management structure. The management functions had been passed from the Belarusian Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection (MNEP) to the Department of Presidential Affairs (DPA), the latter focusing primarily on economic development. Alongside new standards for biodiversity protection, the national park regime has introduced opportunities for more flexible economic use, which – as several interviewees report – has opened up a window for resource exploitation for economic purposes with the implicit support of the DPA. In addition, it was mentioned that a shift in responsibility

from the MNEP to the DPA was due to the latter's willingness to take control of the investments made by the World Bank.

The "Forest Biodiversity Protection Project Belarus" financed by the World Bank was officially launched in 1992 as a part of a larger initiative for enhancing capacity for biodiversity preservation in Central and Eastern Europe – one of the pilot actions undertaken by international aid agencies in the former communist countries (World Bank, 1992; 1998). One million US dollars was a significant and timely investment, and it opened up the possibility of maintaining the system of nature protection and scientific research in the national park, which was suffering from severe social and economic problems typical of post-communist societies in the early 1990s.

The project, designed in accordance with up-to-date international standards of biodiversity protection, contained two groups of objectives (World Bank, 1998). The *scientific* objectives included: maintaining ongoing and new studies on ecosystem functioning and conservation; establishing a system of air and soil monitoring and a forest gene bank; developing GIS for monitoring and management of the forest ecosystem; purchasing equipment (e.g. computers and monitoring equipment); and scientific training courses for park personnel. The *management and social* objectives were emphasized as a new aspect of the project and involved: expanding the area of the national park to support the integrity of the ecosystem; developing a complex management plan; fostering participation of the interested groups; enhancing sustainable economic and social development; and promoting contacts with the Polish side.

The World Bank project evaluation documents report significant advances having been achieved, despite the fact that difficulties in cooperation and different approaches applied by the World Bank managers and local implementers lead to a delay in the project implementation (World Bank, 2001). The initiative was officially completed in 1997, two years later than planned, and

received positive evaluations at different levels: in 1997 the Belavezhskaya Pushcha received a Council of Europe Diploma, an award in special recognition of protected areas of international importance.

However, ten years after project completion – the term of project sustainability according to the reporting documents (World Bank, 1998; 2001) – the project appears to be producing rather poor results, as indicated by a number of environmental and social conflicts. Excessive logging, illegal use of forest resources by the local population, improper forest management and planning are reported by the respondents as environmental conflicts. Local unemployment, a relatively low level of economic development, and tensions between the administration and other groups (local population, NGOs and scientific community) are among the social conflicts triggered in the area (Dranchuk, 2004). The rotation of administrative and scientific personnel and nontransparent, top-down management of the national park result in growing mistrust and disapproval, as expressed by NGOs and in public protests. Due to the high rate of turnover among the scientific staff, the results from training activities do not benefit current research and management. In 2007, the Council of Europe temporarily withdrew the Diploma, because management practices in the national park did not meet international standards. As the main condition for renewing the Diploma, the national park was requested to prepare and submit a management plan and to correct present management strategies (Council of Europe, 2007).

The difference between the positive immediate evaluation of the project and the evaluation conducted ten years on leads us to ask whether the results reported by the independent experts and high-level professionals were incorrect. If not, would it have been possible to foresee the current situation and the poor sustainability of project results at the time of project completion?

4. Analysis: Evaluating the World Bank initiative in Belarus - different stories of the same project.

In order to answer the questions above, we reflect on how different systems of evaluation or “perception lenses” may portray different aspects of reality and indicate communication difficulties between implementers and external actors. For this analysis, we used official administrative and scientific documents as well as interviews and a review. In 2005-2006, 7 semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with representatives from the current and former administration and employees of the national park, managers of the World Bank, national level agencies, public organizations and the scientific community. Informal communications in 2005-2008 were used to back up the interviews. In early 2006, a questionnaire survey (dealing with the conflict in the national park, the composition of stakeholders and their interests, power distribution, and the effectiveness of the WB project implementation) was conducted among the local population with the help of local activists. We received and analyzed 20 responses from people representing different age and occupation groups. When giving questionnaires to people who agreed to give a response we kept an eye on the diversity of interviewees. Therefore, the actual response rate is difficult to determine. However, the general tendency is that people were rather reluctant to give their opinion to a local activist, which is also confirmed by similar experiences had by other researchers (G. Kozulko, M. Shushkova and L. Shushkova, personal communication, 2006).

First, we summarize the data from official evaluations of the project *outcomes*, as reflected in reporting documents from the World Bank (World Bank, 1998; 2001) and the Belarusian side (Luchkov et al, 1997), along with data from interviews concerning project implementation and the present state of affairs. Second, we analyze the *process* of project implementation, using the criteria developed by Wittmer et al. (2006), based on the interviews and the surveys among the local population as well as our own analysis of background materials.

Outcome evaluation

The documents from the World Bank present a detailed account, based on a comprehensive system of indicators, of how the planned *outcomes* were achieved. The indicators were primarily of a quantitative nature: area covered by the national park, number of animal species, amount of equipment purchased, etc. A similar approach applied by the Belarusian side was presented at scientific conferences during and after the project implementation as well as in a book entitled “Belovezhskaya Pushcha Forest Biodiversity Conservation“ (Luchkov et al, 1997) published in Russian and English. Although described as “synthesizing the technical and scientific research, a social assessment, and specific management actions” the volume, co-authored by the representatives of research organizations and official project managers from both sides, is largely natural scientific in character, with a notable emphasis on biological research. Due to the specific character of the reported outcomes and related indicators it would not be possible to provide a detailed account of them here. Below we summarise the main groups of objectives and reported outcomes and comment briefly on the present situation.

- *Expansion of the Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park as a protected area* (reported as “achieved”)

Outcomes: Approximately 12,000 ha were added to the BPNP territory which provided necessary protection to ecologically valuable areas and improved the sustainability of the National Park.

Present situation: Additional areas have increased the spatial integrity of the ecosystem; however, not all the areas added correspond to the standards of management and quality of natural protected areas; at present, there are requests for further optimization, e.g. for extension of the zone of strict protection and limitation of the economic activity on newly added areas.

- *Maintaining scientific research in the national park* (reported as “achieved in principle”).

Outcomes: A number of scientific activities (maintaining of gene bank, in-situ and ex-situ forest conservation, long-term monitoring programs and experiments) were supported; new research projects (optimization of ungulates population, air pollution monitoring, GIS for forest management, spatial planning) have been launched.

Present situation: Although the measures had significant immediate effects, the number of scientific programmes is currently declining, due in part to rotation of research personnel; research cooperation with the Polish side is still limited; scientific management is strongly dependent on the interests of economic use.

- *Support to research infrastructure* (reported as “achieved”)

Outcomes: The project provided equipment for scientific research (pollution analysis and monitoring), computers, vehicles, and a GIS software.

Present situation: While the official actors confirm that the research equipment is still being utilized, several non-official respondents report that it is being used ineffectively and that there is a lack of maintenance; there is no information suggesting any significant update of the existing research infrastructure during the last few years.

- *Professional development and training* (reported as “achieved”)

Outcomes: professional scientific training (workshops, study tours, professional contacts) has been evaluated as very successful. Training on technical and planning issues (sustainable agriculture and nature-based tourism) is reported to have taken place.

Present situation: There is almost no trained staff currently employed in the scientific or management divisions of the national park; no local respondents mention having been involved or having benefited from the management training on sustainable agriculture or tourism.

- *Development of a Management Plan for Belovezhskaya Puscha and bordering areas* (reported as “achieved in principle”)

Outcomes: Suggestions by the group of planners and scientific objectives have been reported in a draft management plan; no other specific planning or policy document has been developed. Nevertheless, the World Bank deems the approach to be “more interdisciplinary and participatory” than the previous schemes for forest management in Belarus.

Comments on present situation: At present, there is no robust policy for national park development. Current policy favours those actors being interested in short-term economic profit rather than in biodiversity preservation; unclear perspectives and responsibilities cause mistrust between the actors, as well as explicit and latent conflicts.

Process evaluation

When looking at the history of the project implementation through the “lenses” of *process evaluation* it is necessary to mention two different perspectives: planned standards and procedures for the *process* described in the project proposal (World Bank, 1992), and its actual implementation (World Bank, 1998; 2001). With a certain degree of generalization, the former reflects the expectations by the World Bank regarding the establishment of new *process* standards for biodiversity governance in Belarus, while the latter shows whether and how the Bank and local partners succeeded in meeting expectations and introducing new standards. Our analysis represents an independent expert *ex-post* evaluation, and framed as a narrative.

- *Integration of knowledge and information*

Planned objectives: The project explicitly aimed to cope with the complexity of the situation and to integrate different types of environmental and social knowledge. An interdisciplinary and international project team had to be created to conduct scientific research and to cooperate with the other stakeholder groups. The management plan – a planning and policy document – was supposed

to integrate scientific and management solutions for biodiversity protection, land-use and social development. Nevertheless, no specific training on management of multi-disciplinary projects, knowledge integration and participatory methods for local managers had been planned or funded.

Actual process: The interdisciplinary team had been formed representing technical and natural sciences – the areas of expertise of the Belarusian partners. During the series of scientific conferences, the experts had a chance to exchange ideas with the Polish side and with international partners, but otherwise had very limited support to develop and integrate social science knowledge. Stakeholder groups other than implementers were present in some consultation events, but this representation was very limited in terms of the groups involved and, especially, the influence this participation had on the actual decision making process. No wider information about the project goals and possibilities of involvement was given to the public, let alone jointly elaborated; no analysis had been conducted of the main stakeholder groups, their interests, knowledge and agency; no mechanisms for interpreting and communicating the expert information (e.g. scientific findings, planning solutions) to non-expert groups had been provided either.

- *Supporting legitimacy*

Planned objectives: The project design, planned measures and results were formally compatible with existing legislation and formal procedures in Belarus. The project intended to promote the use of additional legal mechanisms that formally existed but were not implemented, e.g. the right to participate in biodiversity governance processes. The initiative aimed to increase representation, transparency and accountability of decision making through participation and knowledge integration.

Actual process: The project implementation initially faced difficulties with the formal procedures of registration and the transfer of funds. The obstacles were resolved by enlisting support from the official actors at the top level, thereby giving over to them a significant part of the project ownership and control over the finances. Due to the lack of previous experience and/or

information, several stakeholder groups did not realize their legal rights or claim them (e.g. for participation, transparency and accountability in decision making) and nor had suggestions for promoting these rights and monitoring their implementation been provided by the international experts. Poor accountability on the part of the implementing parties towards the other groups resulted in the official actors and scientific experts dominating the process to a significant extent.

- *Promoting social dynamics*

Planned objectives: The project intended to facilitate new relationships between the actors, increase trust, support a more balanced distribution of power, and increase the capacity of less influential stakeholder groups. Stakeholder involvement, training courses for academics, managers and locals were planned as the instruments to facilitate these social processes.

Actual process: The majority of the educational activities were academically oriented, and no training had been provided to enhance the capacity of the other groups (e.g. objectives and opportunities for participation; sustainable forestry and agriculture etc.) or for trainers. Mechanisms for sustaining the training results had not been provided for. Ineffective involvement and cases of “false” participation resulted in growing mistrust between the actors and with regard to a fair representation of their interests. Poor communication across the groups provided little possibility for mutual learning or for changing behavior. Investments had resulted in further empowerment of already powerful actors (e.g. administration) and had had almost no positive influence on the agency of other stakeholders.

- *Cost-effectiveness*

Planned objectives: The effectiveness and sustainability of the major investments in the scientific part of the project were to be achieved by implementing the management plan, running education activities and ensuring stakeholder involvement. The idea was that the management plan should be a document that provided guidance in integrating scientific findings into development

strategies on the basis of new standards for biodiversity management, and therefore securing investments in the medium and long term.

Actual process: Investments made in the scientific part had a significant positive effect on maintaining biodiversity protection upon project completion. However, failure to achieve strategic objectives, including developing and adopting a management plan, and to introduce more effective biodiversity management practices resulted in poor effectiveness of investments in the longer run. A more transparent and balanced administration of the national park might have lessened the loss of human capital due to high staff turnover.

Comparative analysis of both types of evaluation indicates a significant emphasis on the *outcome-related* actions reflected in the reporting documents from both sides (Luchkov et al, 1997; World Bank, 1998). Having been articulated in the *planning* documents (World Bank, 1992), the *process-related* objectives were significantly overlooked during the implementation phase and there appeared to be very limited attempts to reflect on the implementation process. Three years after project completion, the World Bank (2001) introduced elements of process evaluation into evaluation schemes for future Bank operations in Eastern Europe. However, the lack of structured evaluation criteria along with the internal character of the document means that it is not possible to communicate the failures identified to the other actors. At the same time, the interviews portray a fairly positive evaluation of the process by the official Belarusian actors; this can be explained by the fact that the implementation process remained within the limits of their usual procedures. Moreover, the occasional involvement of other stakeholder groups in consultation and training events made it possible to report (perhaps in good faith) that the new standards for biodiversity protection had been successfully met. Nevertheless, fifteen years after project completion, the present situation in the national park suggests that an unbalanced emphasis on the *outcome* (purchasing equipment and commissioning additional science-based studies, etc.) was an obvious drawback of the management strategy and eventually led to the low

level of sustainability of the outcomes. The lack of management *processes*, including one for preparing a management plan based on stakeholder involvement, is likely to be the main reason of why the investments have not been effective in the longer term.

With a certain degree of generalization, the World Bank project in Belavezhskaya Pushcha illustrates the situation described in Figure 1, part B. Shared criteria and techniques for *outcome* evaluation provided “perceptual lenses” that were clear and transparent for both local managers and the World Bank experts. The analysis of the *process* has remained at the level of “in-house” reflections, with no clear criteria or standards communicated between the parties. The case study also gives insights into how such a “situation B” may manifest itself over the longer term: while both parties agree that the scientific and technical outcomes have been achieved, a failure to communicate and agree on a common vision of the process standards resulted in a failure to establish effective implementation and to support the sustainability of the investments.

5. Discussion: A case of mismanagement or a compendium of repeated errors?

Placing the results of our analysis in the wider regional context enables us to reflect on whether the failure of the Belarusian project represents a specific case of mismanagement or whether it can be considered within a broader “web” of repeated errors in cooperation between international organizations and Eastern European partners. In order to advance our understanding of how the partners’ actions do not support – or even contradict – their declared objectives, we identify three groups of factors.

First, the *dominance of natural-science and technical expertise* is among the most apparent obstacles affecting the implementation of international projects in CEE. Although a multi-disciplinary participatory approach was clearly indicated among the priorities of the World Bank initiative in Belavezhskaya Pushcha, the majority of the interviewees representing Belarusian

scientific and management communities admit that the purely natural-science character of the project corresponded to its initial objectives. The majority of the local respondents to the survey also agrees that the project was scientific in character. This indicates poor communication of the real project's objectives, which "by default" was considered a "scientific" initiative in line with traditional perceptions.

The prevalence of technical expertise in CEE states – or rather, the lack of social science and multi-disciplinary expertise – seems to be widely recognized by the international research community (cp. Wolchik, 1991; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004). Nevertheless, it seems that very little has been done to address this problem at the management level. Thus, referring to Wolchik (1991) – more than ten years after his research – VanDeveer and Carmin (2004) identify the same problem, also stressing the role of the EU and international organizations in fostering an unbalanced use of technical expertise. While the local Environmental Ministries lack the capacity to implement complex international environmental policies and – logically – tend to rely on traditional technical expertise, their international partners seem to follow the same logic in order to avoid possible management problems and to secure a timely and "smooth" delivery of the outcomes.

Second, knowledge integration is closely connected to the *imbalance in the representation of different actors and to the unequal nature of the cooperation between international organizations and local partners*. The case study raises the issues of insufficient knowledge about the actors and interests at stake, explicit and implicit ignorance of less powerful groups, and a lack of mechanisms for involvement. In this paper we would like to emphasize particularly the empowerment of specific groups through their cooperation with the international agencies – the lesser known issue which seems to be typical for Eastern Europe. In their search for effective means of project implementation, the World Bank managers acquired support at the highest national level. Although this was extremely helpful during the early stages (World Bank, 1998),

the seizing of control by the official actors that subsequently occurred decreased transparency and the possibility of involvement for other groups (World Bank, 2001, personal communication in 2005-2008). The emerging civil society groups were largely ignored by the project implementers who, also for the sake of loyalty to the domestic authorities, preferred cooperation with less “problematic” and more established research-oriented NGOs. At the same time, data from the interviews and surveys show that a significant number of the respondents point towards international organizations as a potential external agency to balance the distribution of power at the domestic level, not least through empowering civic society.

Following Keohane (1996), the empirical evidence from the case study confirms that in Eastern Europe, where traditions of centralized top-down governance are very strong, international aid projects are unlikely to be a success without the active support of governmental authorities. However, the long-term effectiveness of financial investments will also not be effective without taking interests into account and developing strong ties between the international managers and “local recipients”, i.e. firms, households and civic organizations (Keohane, 1996; Fairman and Ross, 1996). At the same time, VanDeveer and Carmin (2004) stress that international and supranational actors often ignore the opportunity to foster the legitimacy of civil society involvement. Instead, the international managers – much like the domestic officials – tend to prioritize technical expertise and to see civic society groups as a source of competition or, at least, as implementers of ready-made policy recipes “on the ground” (VanDeveer and Carmin 2004).

Third, alongside power distribution, the imbalance in representation strongly connects to *the lack of knowledge about objectives and methods of participation*. Despite the fact that there was no local expertise concerning the organization of participatory processes in the Belarusian project, no funds or expert support had been provided to develop this expertise. During an interview, one of the project managers from Belarus – at that time in charge for preparing a similar initiative in another

national park – mentioned that the domestic team was finding it extremely difficult to organize the participatory process according to “international standards” due to a lack of adequate knowledge. Comparing his experience to that of peer colleagues, he mentioned that they also “don’t really know how to deal with it”.

The effectiveness of directly replicating “western” standards of democratic participation in CEE remains an open issue and one that has received very little attention from researchers to date (Carmin, 2003; Hutcheson and Korosteleva, 2006; personal communication in 2005-2008; Kluvankova-Oravska et al, 2009). The objectives and methods of “democratic participation” may be interpreted differently by foreign managers and local implementers (Hutcheson and Korosteleva, 2006). The existing local formal and informal institutions are in many cases suited to domestic conditions. This does not mean, however, that they are acting effectively and that innovations in the form of international standards for participation are not needed. These controversies stress even more the need to make a careful selection of participatory methods that build on local realities and that, at the same time, reach the level of management effectiveness currently associated with “western” participatory techniques (cf. Agrawal, 2000). This requires allocating human and financial resources to build fit-for-purpose institutional structures for participation (Carmin, 2003).

6. Conclusions

Our analysis of the Belavezhszkaya Pushcha case study supports and specifies the conclusions from several other examples of international aid initiatives in post-communist countries (c.f. Keohane, 1996; Fairman and Ross, 1996; Gutner, 2002; Andonova, 2004; VanDeveer and Carmin, 2004) and shows that both international and local implementers setting up new standards for environmental management in Central and Eastern Europe face many common problems. Among the most typical obstacles are:

- the dominance of technical and natural scientific approaches and a lack of social science perspectives, especially from the local implementers, as well as the lack of “warning signals” from the international managers regarding these issues;
- an unbalanced representation of different actors caused, for example, by the lack of background stakeholder analysis as a necessary part of the project procedures and financing;
- powerful implementation by official high-level actors often purposely tolerated by international organizations looking for smoother implementation procedures;
- underestimated role of civil society (NGOs and local actors) as partners for donor organizations in implementing international but locally adopted standards for decision-making; this is due to the fear of international managers that they will lose the support of official actors as well as to the extra effort needed to cooperate with civil society;
- lack of knowledge about and experience in participatory involvement as well as the benefits and obstacles involved in participatory processes in the short and longer term; little support for developing this knowledge throughout project implementation.

Although these problems are not new and have been reported in the literature, they are still often overlooked by the official project evaluations, which traditionally focus on technical *outcomes* as reflected in quantitative indicators. Since they are transparent and understandable to both international managers and technically oriented academic and policy communities in Eastern Europe, *outcome* evaluations have significant value in the context of reporting on the targeted objectives achieved (or not) upon project completion. However, the example of the World Bank project in Belarus shows that even a correct and positive outcome evaluation is unable to guarantee the sustainability of project results and investments in the longer term. One reason for this is that project sustainability is likely to have a strong link to the effective organization of the

implementation *process* which, in turn, is closely linked to good knowledge of local specificities (cp. Rauschmayer et al, 2009).

Our analysis suggests that a structured *process* evaluation makes it possible to identify existing deficiencies in project implementation and related threats to project sustainability; it also provides the management team with ideas about how to overcome these deficiencies and threats. Therefore *outcome* and *process* evaluations have different but complementary functions; however, to make use of these functions, they should not be perceived as “mere” ex-post evaluations and reporting by the partners to the agencies they are accountable to. Instead, evaluation procedures should occur in parallel with the project implementation, representing a constant iterative reflection by all the parties involved. Visions, standards, priorities and “warning signals” can be reflected through the balanced composition of *outcome*- and *process*-related criteria, or “perceptual lenses”, which are transparent and meaningful for the all parties involved (Figure 1, part C). Indeed, not establishing a transparent and comprehensive evaluation system (Figure 1, part A) or establishing it only in part (Figure 1, part B) may have significant detrimental effects (e.g. in longer term) by introducing a “systems error” in communications even despite the good intentions of managers on both sides.

The analysts of the first international aid initiatives in CEE hoped that, despite numerous failures, repeated attempts by the donors and recipients to improve coordination could be the best way forward towards increasing the effectiveness of the investments (Connolly et al, 1996). Now that the first lessons concerning the pilot investments have been drawn, this message could easily be repeated. However, collective experience shows that improved coordination demands that both sides act as stakeholders in developing and pursuing a common clear and transparent goal. Well-tailored and fit-for-purpose systems of evaluation and monitoring have the capacity to

significantly contribute to the communication and learning process; this capacity has not yet been realized to its full extent.

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