

# EDUCATION AND LOCAL COMMUNITY AS KEY FACTORS IN PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION. RESULTS AND GOOD PRACTICES FROM A PROJECT WITH EU FINANCMENT

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**Abstract:** *Since the second half of the twentieth century, an increasingly strong environmental protection movement has emerged and developed with visible effects on the health of the environment. This movement consisted of public and/or private initiatives aimed at raising awareness about the effects of human behaviour on the environment. In this sense, at global and European level, documents, programmes and strategies have been initiated to reduce the harmful effects of industries (often polluting) on the environment, promoting a green economy, green jobs, sustainable development and environmental education. An extremely important role in the implementation of these measures was played by the programs and projects initiated not only at national level, but also at local level. This article aims to highlight the importance of externally funded projects (in the case study we have chosen to present, European funded projects) and how their outputs are achieved through the involvement of educational institutions. The school is one of the most important institutions of social control, therefore, any project that aims to be a successful one must involve the school as a social institution and the pupils as a target group. The research we present in the second part of the project highlights the need to develop an education for environmental protection and the use of the school-community dyad in building sustainable development and an eco-citizenship.*

**Keywords:** environmental policy; education; sustainable development; EU financed projects; local community.

## 1. Context: objectives of the EU environmental policy

Environmental policy consists of setting a set of balanced and interrelated objectives in order to improve the quality of the environment as well as to adequately manage natural resources. To achieve these objectives, there is also decision-making and the implementation of specific actions, as well as the support of standards, institutions and procedures (European Commission, 2008: 24). Thus, an environmental policy implies a challenge to be overcome, a commitment of the state and not of a government, as well as a strong social participation (Lonroth, 2006). Environmental policy is in fact an art of execution: everything is a matter of means and methods as soon as the ends are, for the most part, the subject of a consensus. By environmental strategy, we mean here restrictively the European strategy to fight against climate change.

Most European policy documents aimed at protecting the environment address various issues, such as: waste management, the preservation of water resources and the control of chemical pollutants fall into this category. "Conventional" species conservation actions (the so-called *Birds* Directive, which is the oldest EU legislation on the environment) and the environment (the so-called *Habitats* Directive) are also

invariant elements that continue to evolve - the *Natura 2000* Network for protected areas (Kubacka and Smaga, 2019; Aulong, 2003: 40; Hermoso, Moran-Ordóñez, Canessa *et al.*, 2019).

European environmental policy is one of the most dynamic fields of activity of the European Union (Murphy, 2001: 39-58). In the Treaty of Rome of 1957, the principles of environmental protection and sustainable development were considered marginal, no competence in this area was explicitly conferred on the Community. In 2001, the adoption of a "Sustainable Development Strategy" at the Gothenburg European Council completed the integration of the objective of sustainability. The Strategy identifies four priority areas (climate change, transport, public health, use of natural resources) and adds the environmental dimension to the economic and social objectives for which European policy was already working. Later, in the Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2009, the principles of environmental protection and sustainable development acquired a central position (Koch, Gullberg, Schoyen and Hvinden, 2016: 704). This document states that the objectives of the European Union in the field of environmental protection include: preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment, protecting health, promoting the rational use of resources and promoting measures to combat environmental problems.

Recently, the most important public policy document is the Europe 2020 Strategy - a European strategy for smart, green and inclusive growth, which focuses on sustainable growth based on environmental protection, protection of biodiversity, "green technologies". Currently (2021-2027) the policy of the European Union for the protection of the environment is articulated around several documents / strategies that are relevant in this field: *European Green Deal* - the EU's roadmap for a sustainable economy, striving to make Europe climate neutral in 2050; *Environment action programme to 2030* - the 8th Environment Action Programme will guide European environmental policy until 2030 etc.

## **2. The importance of EU projects designed to protect the environment and promote environmental education.**

When we talk about projects designed to protect the environment and promote an education for the environment, these are not huge projects or large international agreements, but sustainable local projects, based on innovation in management, cooperation, community participation and a strong presence of the environmental education at all levels of the education system (Sarty and John, 2019: 165-181). These projects aim to promote environmental actions developed thanks to the great participation of citizens, divided into small territories which, in a certain manner, generate processes of "territorialization" (Horlings, 2015:164).

Environmental planning is developed within an interdisciplinary framework that allows methodological progress through mutual learning between specialists in different natural and social sciences as well as communities when they can fully participate in these processes. One of the planning models used to promote sustainability is the Pressure-State-Response - PSR model, developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Levrel, Kerbiriou, Couvet and Weber, 2009; Meyar-Naimi and Vaez-Zadeh, 2012). This model is an analytical and integrative tool that classifies information on the state of the environment, using environmental indicators, according to its relationships with social, economic and

political circles. But what we must agree completely is that it is necessary to develop, agree and implement an environmental policy that includes social actors and that is at the service of the interests of society, as an integral part of national policy, as is the case for education and health. This involves putting scientific research at the service of national interests, academia and NGOs. These policies must, moreover, be applied according to the geographic realities of each society and region. They should not be exclusively based on specific support from international organizations.

At EU level, part of the *European Green Deal* strategy (Eckert and Kovalevska, 2021; Barry and Hoyne 2021), there were developed two main support mechanisms and financial resources, with the *Next Generation EU 2021-2027* : a) *Horizon Europe*, with a total budget of €95.5 billion and b) *LIFE Programme* (the only EU project entirely dedicated to environment) with a total budget of €5.4 billion.

The LIFE programme is the financial instrument of the European Commission to support projects in the fields of the environment and climate. It is aimed at promoters of public and private projects and aims to promote and finance innovative projects relating, for example, to the conservation of species and habitats, soil protection, improvement of the quality of the environment. air or water, waste management or even mitigation or adaptation to climate change and energy transition.

For the period 2021-2027, the LIFE programme will have a budget of 5.4 billion euros at European level. The LIFE programme is divided into 4 sub-programs: *Nature and biodiversity*; *Circular economy and quality of life*; *Climate change mitigation and adaptation*; *Transition to clean energy*<sup>1</sup>.

Regarding projects with European funding intended for environmental protection, through the LIFE programme (Quevauviller *et. al*, 2005), they facilitate and participate in:

- The integration of environmental and sustainable development education approaches into regional systems, plans and schemes relating to ecological transition in order to increase everyone's capacity to implement it;
- The development of educational practices and social innovations for a broader leverage and mobilization effect among citizens;
- The implementation of diversified educational approaches (information, awareness, eco-citizenship, education and local mobilization, etc.) contributing to the movement of citizens and stakeholders;
- The effective and differentiated application of environmental education and sustainable development for society in all its components: children, pupils, students, young people, employees, decision-makers, retirees, families, citizens etc;
- The deployment of a dynamic of appropriation of the objectives of sustainable development.

### **3. School and community as key factors in promoting environmental protection through EU financed projects. A sociological analysis on project's outputs**

Environmental education not only allows children to acquire reflexes and adopt behaviours essential to the survival of the planet, but also offers the opportunity to introduce the systemic and global approach, allowing pupils to see the world as a

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on LIFE programme, see: [https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/life\\_ro](https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/life_ro)

complex system, and therefore adopt a thought that integrates the components of their environment as interacting elements (Meirieu, 2001: 16).

### **3.1. Short description of the project**

The project within we have conducted the sociological survey was a project financed by the European Social Fund (FSE), through The Operational Sectorial Programme for Environment (2017-2013). It was a project developed during 2013 and 2015, in 2 rural communities from Dolj County and it was related to a protected natural area. Although the overall objective of the project was to conserve and protect biodiversity in a protected natural area, one of the specific objectives was raising public awareness of the importance of conserving and protecting biodiversity

The target group of the project included: local authorities, pupils, representatives of hunters and fishermen associations, members of the local community (population). The most important categories of the target group were students and members of the local community, described in the table below:

**Table 1 : Demographic characteristics of the local community and pupils as parts of the target groups for the project**

Target group	Target group description	Target group quantification	Project output
Local community	Inhabitants of Bratovoesti, Dolj county  Inhabitants of Teasc, Dolj county	3693 inhabitants (2013) (according to Dolj County Council)  3428 inhabitants (2013) (according to Dolj County Council)	Increasing the level of information and awareness. Improving the degree of information of the population on the benefits and opportunities generated by the efficient management of the protected natural area.
Pupils who were living in Bratovoesti and Teasc	Pupils who participated in the information and awareness sessions and seminars	600 pupils	Pupils awarned of the importance of biodiversity in the protected natural area.

### **3.2. School activities to increase awareness on environment**

Awareness seminars on the protected natural area were held during the project. In simple terms, information was presented on what the protected natural area represents and how this area can be protected, according to the regulations and the minimum measures of the area. Students were introduced to the main features of the area: general information about the area, the importance of the area for biodiversity (protected species of national/community interest of the area, socio-economic importance), current problems and threats of the area, general rules of behaviour in the area. Several issues related to the economic and social benefits of the area, such as the creation of new jobs in ecotourism (the area has such potential), were also addressed in a simple and concise manner, thus, ensuring diversification of the local economy and an increase in economic stability in the area, as well as the improvement

of living conditions, but also the reduction of local environmental problems, such as water pollution.

Until the start of the project, there were very few activities in schools near the protected natural area to educate pupils on the conservation of the area's biodiversity (in fact, they were almost non-existent). There were also no activities to ensure continuity in pupils' education for biodiversity conservation. By making pupils aware of conservation measures in the protected area, of important species in the protected area and of the need for their conservation - it was possible to increase the awareness of pupils from the two rural communities. In this way, the activity and the project, overall, has contributed to raising the general level of awareness on environment protection and to the sustainable development of the protected natural area.

### **3.3. Project's outputs in terms of awareness on environment for pupils and local community**

During the period of implementation of this project (2013-2015), there were organized: 10 pupils awareness seminars, with a trainer present at the school (during these seminars questionnaires were applied to pupils from 3 middle schools located in the area of action of the project); 2 awareness-raising seminars for local stakeholders (in this case, 60 questionnaires were applied) and 2 events for informing and raising awareness of the local population on environment protection and protected areas (100 questionnaires were applied). One important fact to mention is that the questionnaires were applied both at the beginning and at the end of the project, in order to obtain feedback on the project's activities. The survey method was used to obtain feedback. Statistical analysis of the collected data was also used, using the SPSS Data Editor program (*Statistical Package for Social Sciences 22.0*). The questionnaire included 12 questions, with free and pre-formulated answers.

**Table 2: How informed are you about the notion of "biodiversity"? (%) (n= 627)**

1.	Less informed	33,4
2.	Informed	27,0
3.	Well informed	25,3
4.	Don't know/ N.A.	14,3
<b>Total</b>		<b>100,0</b>

**Table 3: Correlations for establishing the impact of project activities (%)**

How informed are you about the notion of "biodiversity"? (n= 627)	Year:			Total	Variation 2014-2015, compared to 2013
	2013	2014	2015		
Well informed	22.2%	<b>72.5%</b>	<b>5.3%</b>	100.0%	<b>+55.6%</b>
Informed	20.8%	<b>72.1%</b>	<b>7.1%</b>	100.0%	<b>+58.4%</b>
Less informed	71.5%	25.0%	3.5%	100.0%	<b>-43.0%</b>
Don't know/ N.A.	84.5%	15.5%		100.0%	<b>-69.0%</b>

Regarding the concept of "biodiversity" it is observed that if, at the beginning of the project implementation (2013), the share of those who considered themselves to be "informed" and "well informed" was relatively low (20.8% and 22, respectively. 2%), during the project implementation this share increased significantly (reaching

72.5% for those who considered themselves to be “well informed” and 72.1% for those who considered themselves to be “informed” about biodiversity).

**Table 4: Do you consider that the degradation of biodiversity in general and the extinction of some species will have effects.... : (%) (n= 627)**

1.	Now, but the impact will be amplified in the future	67.0
2.	In the future	19.6
3.	Now	5.5
4.	It is not a problem/ I am not interested in the subject	3.2
5.	Don't know/ N.A.	4.7
<b>Total</b>		<b>100.0</b>

The importance of conservation of protected species in the area was recognized by all categories of the target group who were involved in the completion of the questionnaires, 67.0% of which considered that the degradation of biodiversity in general and the extinction of some species have effects. but the impact will be amplified in the future. Only 3.2% of respondents indicated that biodiversity degradation is not a problem, which may lead us to conclude that they are among the 14.3% who, at the time, were only informed low level of "biodiversity".

**Table 5: How informed and documented are you about this protected natural area? (%) (n= 627)**

1.	Very little informed	21.0
2.	I know a few things, but I want to document myself and get more information on this subject	46.1
3.	I am well documented and informed on this subject	25.4
4.	Don't know/ N.A.	7.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>100,0</b>

**Table 6: Correlations for establishing the impact of project activities (%)**

How informed and documented are you about this protected natural area? (n= 627)		Year:			Total	Variation 2014-2015, compared to 2013
		2013	2014	2015		
	Very little informed	71.5%	27.8%	0.7%	100.0%	-43.0%
	I know a few things, but I want to document myself and get more information on this subject	26.2%	59.0%	14.8%	100.0%	+47.6%
	I am well documented and informed on this subject	21.6%	68.6%	9.8%	100.0%	+56.8%
	Don't know/ N.A.	71.0%	27.0%	2.0%	100.0%	-42.0%

From the table above, it is observed that following the implementation of the project, the share of those who stated that they are well documented and informed about the protected natural area increased by 56.8% (compared to 2013) and by

47.6% the share of who did not consider themselves well documented but wanted more information. At the same time, the share of those who were very little informed decreased by 43.0%, compared to 71.5% in 2013.

**Table 7: If you consider yourself informed, where do you get information about protected plant and animal species from the protected natural area? (%)**

1.	School	32.6
2.	Seminaries within the project	25.5
3.	Internet	8.9
4.	Project presentation flyers	4.9
5.	The NGO that carries out awareness activities in the area	3.9
6.	Mass-media	2.3
7.	Family members	1.5
8.	Local authorities	0.7
9.	Don't know/ N.A.	19.7
<b>Total</b>		<b>100.0</b>

**Table 8: Correlations for establishing the impact of project activities (%)**

How informed and documented are you about this protected natural area? (n= 627)		Year:			Total
		2013	2014	2015	
	School	12,6%	77,5%	9,9%	<b>100,0%</b>
	Seminaries within the project	27,3%	52,3%	20,5%	100,0%
	Internet	26,7%	67,0%	6,3%	<b>100,0%</b>
	Project presentation flyers	-	84,2%	15,8%	<b>100,0%</b>
	The NGO that carries out awareness activities in the area	9,3%	86,5%	4,2%	<b>100,0%</b>
	Mass-media	36,4%	63,6%	-	100,0%
	Family members	100,0%		-	100,0%
	Local authorities	12,6%	77,5%	9,9%	<b>100,0%</b>
	Don't know/ N.A.	81,4%	17,5%	1,1%	100,0%

Following the implementation of the project, the ways of disseminating information on the protected natural area where this project took place proved to be successful, given the following percentages recorded for information sources: awareness seminars within the project (an increase of 74.8%, compared to 2013); informations from school (an increase of 46.6%, compared to 2013); informations presented in flyers (an increase of 100.0%, compared to 2013); informations presented by the NGO that was carrying out awareness activities in the area (an increase of 100.0%, compared to 2013, at the beginning of the project).

## 5. Conclusions

One of the most important conclusions of our study and, of course, of the project carried out was that one of the key factors in increasing awareness on environment is the local community. Of course, in each community, especially rural communities (like one in which we have carried out this project) the most important 2

institutions are the city hall (local authorities) and the school (education). Working with pupils in schools, helping them to be more informed on environment issues, helps them to become more and more aware of the environment protection and contributes at the forming of their citizenship education. Therefore, environmental education constitutes a privileged entry point for citizenship education. For this, it is not enough to reduce its implementation to the simple transmission of knowledge. It is essential to broaden its scope by considering the personal and social development that it can induce. Also, helping pupils to become more informed and aware of the environment issues can have a direct impact on their personal life (as future adults and citizens), but also, on their families and, in long term, on the entire community, which become more involved in protecting the environment.

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