

**CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN A RURAL CROSS-BORDER AREA OF THE WESTERN BALKANS<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

*The World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), USAID and the International Relief/Development Project (IRDP) concluded in different reports that participatory development programs are invariably more effective at addressing local needs and interventions are more often sustained given the engagement of local actors. The main objective of this paper is to present a detailed appraisal of the implementation process of a well-known participatory approach (the UNDP-designed Area-Based Development - ABD) in the challenging context of a rural, cross-border area (in the Western Balkans). Besides reviewing the theoretical and empirical advantages of participatory and endogenous development, this case study reflects the practical shortcomings related to the selection process of a target area and to obtaining commitment from different agents in a post-conflict zone. This article also highlights that adequate implementation of participatory practices is crucial to obtain accurate quantitative and qualitative data (to guide the development agenda) and secure the involvement of both local and (inter)national actors. The latter is an important factor in fostering long-term engagement to development strategies and the achievement of results that are relevant for the local community and in harmony with national policies and international agreements.*

**Key words:** *Participatory mechanisms, Target area definition, cross-border local and rural development, Western Balkans.*

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## Introduction

Area-based development (ABD) is a UNDP-developed approach which targets specific geographical areas characterized by a particular complex development problem that needs to be addressed considering not only short but also long term solutions covering a variety of aspects. In this paper, the implementation of ABD in an area consisting of 14 municipalities (6 Bosnian, 2 Montenegrin, and 6 Serbian also denominated as Drina Valley-Tara Mountain Target Area, refer to Table 1) is used to draw the lessons and recommendations that are specifically relevant for practitioners conducting ABD or other participatory development approaches in contexts characterized by rural, post-conflict and cross-border components. (For more details on the project implementation and partners refer to Santini et al, 2012)

**Table 1.** Municipalities included in the Drina-Tara target area

Participating municipalities		
SERBIA (RS) √ Ljubovija √ Bajina Bašta √ Užice √ Čajetina √ Priboj √ Prijepolje	MONTENEGRO (ME)  √ Pljevlja √ Bijelo Polje	BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA (BiH) √ Bratunac √ Milići √ Srebrenica √ Višegrad √ Rudo √ Goražde
Population (number of inhabitants)		
208 400	86 090	115 883
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )		
3 723	2 257	1 126

*Source:* Statistical Yearbooks Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia Herzegovina (2009)

Given the particular nature of such a target area and the fact that to our knowledge the ABD approach (nor any other participatory development approach) has never been explicitly implemented in said context, the objective of the paper is twofold. First, ABD implementation advantages and disadvantages are analysed in terms of their suitability to guide successful participatory development programs in this specific setting. Second, an adapted methodology (based on improved participatory mechanisms and organizational strategies) is proposed in order to increase ABD (and other participatory development approaches) implementation success rates and sustainability<sup>9</sup>.

The paper is structured as follows: first, the inherent conceptual and methodological characteristics of the ABD approach are briefly reviewed. This is followed by an introduction to the advantages and disadvantages of ABD and the specific challenges/obstacles encountered in the implementation of ABD in the selected case study environment. Simultaneously, the strategies designed to overcome said

<sup>9</sup> Another point of relevance of this paper is that a successful implementation of this type of projects sheds positive light in the possibility of accession of Balkan countries to the European Union whose member countries are commonly cooperating across borders.

limitations are discussed. Lastly, in the conclusions, the lessons learnt and recommendations to successfully adapt the ABD approach to rural cross-border and post-conflict contexts are summarized.

### The ABD Approach

As said by Harfst (2006) ABD targets *specific geographical areas* in a country, characterised by a *particular complex development problem*, through an *inclusive, integrated, participatory* and *flexible* approach. ABD's *area-based* or *territorial focus* derives from the understanding that the *space or area* in which people live should be the central point for improvement. The selected area basically corresponds to the geographical zone where a *specific development challenge* is faced. It could thus refer to a region or even municipality (or neighbourhood) in any given country, or (as in the case of the present case study) to a cross-border zone including a variety of municipalities and individuals from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds, provided they were all afflicted by a common problem or set of problems. Accordingly, the main purpose under the ABD approach is to serve the entire population within the area in question, rather than pre-establishing categories of potential beneficiaries (UNDP, 2009b); this is what the term *inclusive* refers to. By *targeting entire communities* instead of community segments or individuals, ABD avoids discriminatory practices among potential beneficiaries. In fact, in ABD, a special emphasis is given to the *participation* at all layers and sectors within the society as a necessary condition to correctly define an appropriate solution to the problem at hand.

The ABD approach is also concerned with identifying root causes (and avoiding undesired symptoms) from a *multi-sector* perspective that *integrates* the views of all stakeholders (Harfst, 2006). The latter is relevant as nowadays it is widely recognised that sustained rural development may not be achieved by focusing on agricultural issues alone. As a result, policy packages tend to *integrate* environmental, socio-political and institutional aspects and seek the engagement of agents from different sectors. The ABD approach thus relies on widely accepted principles that are common to rural development methods, in the sense that *participation* based on *bottom-up* initiatives and *flexibility* are key features. It is interesting to highlight that in recent years, there has been a distinct alteration in the factors influencing rural development schemes. It has become evident that projects that do not obtain *commitment and involvement* from the beneficiaries can hardly ever secure a long-term effect (FAO, 2007). On the whole, there has been a shift from a *top-down*, subsidy-based strategy to a *bottom-up* focus on *local* assets and investment in order to improve regional competitiveness (OECD, 2006). This reflects the tendency in development approaches to see rapid development and democratic participation 'as complements, to stress the need for voice and participation as a means of ensuring that reforms are politically sustainable, and to recognise as a fundamental right individuals' having a say over the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods (Sen, 1999).

Other rural development approaches share one or several of the ABD traits, for example the Leader approach is also *place-based* and *bottom-up*, but only to a certain extent *inclusive* and *multi-sectorial*: it focuses on purely rural players (excluding small and

medium towns linked to surrounding rural areas) and does not cover the full spectrum of economic activities (large industries and infrastructures being usually covered by other EU policies than the rural development one). ABD seems to have a rather unique trait with its ambition to address all the aspects at once. This poses particular challenges as a sense of community and common purpose must be in place before local agents can address their development objectives. In the case of a cross-border setting, even higher relevance must be given to this particular issue.

It is noteworthy that the ABD main features mentioned above (principally those shared with rural development approaches) can be related to identifiable theoretical insights. For instance, the *participatory* and *inclusive* traits of ABD are coherent with the idea or concept that 'development is not just about increasing goods and services provided and consumed by society. It also involves enabling communities to have greater control over their relationship with the environment and other communities.' (Shortall and Shucksmith, 1998). The latter links back to the Putnam's (1995) theories of social capital (where trust, norms and networks, are expected to improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions) and North's (1990) consideration of effective institutional coordination. For North (1990), higher coordination within socio-economic agents (which stems from an appropriate institutional framework<sup>10</sup>) implies a reduction in transaction costs, thus leading to a positive impact on productivity. Another theoretical stand which supports the ABD approach is the conviction that local governance allows for 'tailoring levels of consumption to the preferences of smaller, more homogeneous groups' (Wallis and Oates, 1988); thus making on-site, localised, *area-based* planning more responsive to *area-specific* needs (Faguet, 2004).

In summary, it can be argued that some of the key theoretical foundations embedded in the ABD or main features are grounded on the notion of *endogenous development*. Ray (2000) states that *endogenous development* is understood as the hypothesis that improvements in the socio-economic well-being of disadvantaged areas can best be brought about by recognising and animating the collective resources of the territory.

The emphasis on the endogenous aspects of socio-economic development is related to the debate that flourished among economists on the endogenous drivers of *economic growth*.

According to Curren and Gleeson (2009, p. 14) endogenous growth models and theory sought to provide a theoretical framework within which long-run growth rate is determined (within the model) through the inclusion of knowledge spill-over, human capital formation, research and development, technology diffusion, etc. As stated by Hoff and Stiglitz (2001, p. 396), this meant that 'the "deep" fundamentals of neo-classical theory – preferences and technology – are themselves endogenous, affected by the social and economic environment'. From the angle of *endogenous development*, standard policies cannot be directly replicated from one place to another, as was usual practice before the 1980s. *Endogenous development* policies must thus be adapted to the cultural,

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<sup>10</sup> Favourable institutions to economic growth include any (formal and informal) convention, norm or statute which secures clearly defined property rights, sets cost-efficient ways to enforce contracts, solve conflicts, condemn opportunistic behaviour, guarantee easy access to information, etc

socio-economic and political context. Moreover, it is expected that the population is enabled to take part in the solution-finding process along with their own resources and capacities. Overall, in terms of policy making this entails that the stimulation and accumulation of these elements at the local level could positively and largely contribute to regional economic integration and convergence of per capita income.

### Challenges to ABD Implementation in a Rural, Post-Conflict and Cross Border Target Area

In the academic literature general advantages and disadvantages associated to ABD programs have been identified (Harfst, 2006, Vrbensky, 2008). Table 2 presents key aspects as summarized by Vrbensky (2008). In the case of rural cross-border target areas, some of these limitations represent particularly relevant setbacks. To begin with, the delineation and selection of the target area becomes a more highly complex process when rural and cross-border aspects are incorporated. Likewise, when dealing with rural economies, it is harder for the stakeholders involved in the participatory approach to identify development potential in sectors not directly interlinked to the activities of agricultural production, agro-food processing or rural tourism. In the same respect, in a cross-border context, understanding the macro-picture, establishing partnerships and integrating different national visions are challenging tasks both from a practical and conceptual viewpoint. Similarly, establishing a sense of community in a post-conflict scenario requires careful selection processes to create the best environment for open and non-confrontational exchanges. Next, the specific problems encountered to define the target area and select participatory mechanisms that could allow capitalizing on acknowledged advantages of ABD while compensating for the identified limitations are presented.

**Table 2.** Strengths and potential limitations of ABD programs

Strengths	Limitations
<b>Integrated approach</b> – allowing for holistic solutions and encouraging horizontal linkages and cross-sector responses even if problems are sector-specific, as development and conflict prevention requires addressing a number of issues holistically to become sustainable	<b>Missing macro-picture</b> – broader strategic context not sufficiently taken into account, weak understanding of macro-situation and policies
<b>Platform for partnership and coordination</b> – high potential for increased participation and better coordination since it promotes cross-sector partnerships and division of labour	<b>Inability to respond to structural problems</b> – even in the case of a good understanding of the broader context, there is limited or no influence on structural issues (e.g. related to conflict, governance, poverty, unemployment)
<b>Promoting regional cooperation</b> – utilization of economies of scale, facilitation of inter-municipal cooperation and trust building, establishment of regional institutions and investment in regional infrastructure	<b>Limited partnerships and lack of coordination</b> – insufficiently broad partnership or inadequate coordination, where partners have no sufficient capacity or mandate to deal with the problems, insufficient focus on or inability to deal with economic development
<b>Understanding of local context</b> – understanding and taking into account specificity of the local situation, high level of insight and closeness to issues and beneficiaries	<b>Fragmentation</b> – local approaches leading to fragmented thinking and realization, partial solutions and duplications

Strengths	Limitations
<b>Involvement of local people</b> – local empowerment, building of human capital, local people as agent of change	<b>Lack of focus</b> – dealing with a broad range of issues superficially leading to a lack of concentration on key problems and results
<b>Enhancement of local democracy</b> – promotion of integration, inclusiveness and non-discrimination through the involvement of the entire community rather than specific group, promotion of participation and transparency, avoiding stigmatization and mentality issue, reduction of perception of social inequality	<b>Visibility trap</b> – concentration on the most visible and easy-to-implement activities instead of promoting systemic change
<b>Support to local governance</b> – promoting subsidiary and decentralization, training local administration, supporting institutional development and organizational reform leading to increased effectiveness	<b>Dependency</b> – developing dependency on external support, often lack of well-planned exit strategy, government reliance on external support leading to lack of involvement and support, preferential treatment for some areas
<b>Manageability and flexibility</b> – focus on manageable size allowing for integrated, comprehensive approach, keeping program relevant in changing context	<b>Capacity substitution</b> – reducing urgency of systemic change, substituting for inefficiency of sector-level policies, insufficient institutional capacity or budgetary support
<b>Improved monitoring and cost-efficiency</b> – better monitoring of results and reflection of lessons learned, improved cost-efficiency through coherent approach avoiding duplications and addressing real needs	<b>Donor-driven and short-term approach</b> – interventions often donor-driven with high expectations and short timeline where conflict context and special development situation requiring longer time frame to generate systemic change

Source: Vrbensky (2008)

### *Area Selection and Delineation*

As discussed in the ABD approach literature (Harfst, 2006), the target area must be characterized by a certain degree of uniformity in terms of development problems and challenges. In the case of the Drina Valley – Tara Mountain target area in the Western Balkans, this uniformity was sought not only in terms of the rural, cross-border, peripheral (from an economic activity perspective), cultural (common language and traditions), post-conflict and relational (previously existing but since the split of Yugoslavia often dormant relations between the 14 municipalities involved) settings, but also in terms of inter-sectorial linkages (tourism-based potential related to local natural resources and agricultural production). In addition, other concerns and interests were the Drina River and its tributaries along which activities related to transport, hydro-electric power, tourism and agriculture were seen as pivotal for the potential of the region.

Nonetheless, a caveat of the case study target area delineation is that some municipalities just adjacent to the 14 selected municipalities also share their basic development problems (e.g. Novo Gorazde, Cajnice, Foca; Zabljak, Pluzine; Nova Varos), but were not included. In the present ABD implementation, their exclusion was mainly based on the fact that a larger number of municipalities would make close and regular contact more difficult and the organization of a stakeholder group and community surveys more time and resource consuming for the project. In other approaches such as Leader, areas covered by LAGs (Local Action Groups), are smaller

(i.e. 10 to 100 000 inhabitants), largely based on the same principle. Although these are valid arguments from an ABD practical/managerial point of view (also since the cross-border nature of the target area posed a priori administrative difficulties) they are less well-grounded from an ABD theoretical point of view.

To overcome this obstacle, literature review was useful in identifying a common development situation and set of constraints. However, field visits and feedback from local experts was also sought when deciding on the final delineation. The latter served to identify stronger linkages between the 14 selected municipalities in comparison to the excluded set of municipalities. The latter implies that the views of stakeholders and the experiences and interrelations of populations in the potential target area must be taken into consideration; thus requiring that the participation process is activated even before the target area is fully delineated. This certainly complicates the decision of area selection, for if local actors are contacted and later excluded or if those joining later consider themselves outsiders, the entire process may also be jeopardized. In this respect an informal exploratory research in the field and an accurate selection of key local experts to inform on the intensity of existing socio-economic linkages are considered an appropriate initial step.

### ***Participatory Mechanisms***

Several participatory instruments and processes were established and utilized to support the implementation of the ABD program in the Drina Valley –Tara Mountain target area. The key objective of these participatory mechanisms and activities was to create the basis for a multi-stakeholder approach to local development. A secondary objective of the participatory mechanisms was also to obtain valuable complementary information for the identification of development needs. The key participatory mechanisms for this project were based on the involvement of:

- stakeholder group (SG) members
- Delphi group (DG) members
- a sample of community representatives, through questionnaire-based surveys and sharing of results with the general public.

The consolidation of the stakeholder and Delphi groups allowed strengthening the commitment of local and national actors to the ABD initiative in the Drina-Tara target area. Surveys were of strategic relevance to both raise awareness on the ABD initiative and secure valuable information with which to contrast the analysis performed by both the SG and DG. Next, these participatory tools are described along with an explanation of how they assisted in addressing specific constraints of the target area.

### ***Stakeholder group (SG): a bottom-up approach based on inputs from selected stakeholders***

The main tasks of the SG were to acknowledge and discuss the baseline development situation, as well as to identify common development needs and priority interventions (along with expected outcomes and correspondent actions), that is to support the area-based development approach in the region with their local knowledge and experience. Three members from each of the 14 project municipalities were invited to take part and a key

challenge in this stage was not only to secure participation but to have a wide representation of the target area society. In other words, not only local authorities but representatives from all relevant areas of the private sector as well as major players within the civil society organizations, including top player NGOs had to be invited. The challenge was to be inclusive without reaching a too large number of stakeholder group members, which would have made consensus too costly to achieve regarding time, or too vague in its development of action proposals.

All municipalities delegated one public senior staff member of their choice to participate in the SG. In order to identify representatives of the civil society and business sectors, criteria were established: participants were bound not only by structural characteristics (such as age, gender, sectorial distribution, geographic and cultural background, etc.) which would allow for a balanced sample of members, but also by the individual's ability or capacity to express and defend his or her own point of view. The latter basically was aimed at preventing shortcomings already identified in other participatory processes where it was said that the 'wealthier, older men ... appropriate new participatory spaces' (BCID, 2007). In other words, representatives selected to the SG had to be opinion leaders (or 'loud mouths') within their segments and also comply with basic traits so that the mixed group of SG members could represent the diverse interests of the target area. For the identification process of SG members, local coordinators of the Drina-Tara ABD project relied on their pre-established network as well as on the information gained during field visits to the different municipalities. Clearly, this implied that the selection process was far from following a democratic procedure, thus subject to some of the disadvantages related to 'selective participation' as defined by Botes and van Rensburg (2000) yet given the nature of the debate, the participants' background ensured that members would be proactive in their contributions and highly motivated to discuss complex development strategies and issues.

Ultimately, a simple three-sector view on the SG composition was embraced, a notion based on the good practice identified in Leader partnerships with a balanced representation of each category of stakeholders (O'IR, 2006). The latter implied a substantial improvement of ABD programs; particularly compared to those previously implemented in the Western Balkans region (see Harfst 2006 for a list) where a strong focus was placed on local governments and therefore not systematically integrating the views from other social segments. The good practice adopted from the Leader experience concerning the composition of public-private partnerships proved to be very useful. By putting the business sector and NGOs together with municipal authority representatives, it was ensured that priorities that were relevant for the society as a whole could be more easily identified (i.e. conforming to the *bottom-up* perspective of ABD) while also promoting public-private partnerships to emerge.

Still, there are important points to consider in this organizational practice. On the one hand, it was absolutely necessary to maintain an animation/coordination team that was efficient and skilful in their networking of the area as it was their challenge to identify, invite and stimulate SG members. Their work ensured that in the SG a sense of social cohesion and inclusiveness could emerge despite bringing together individuals from

different backgrounds. Their role helped to establish a sense of ownership. The 'cross-border' composition of this animation team was also a critical asset since it contributed to overcome sensitive issues arising from the interactions between heterogeneous groups of participants<sup>11</sup>. Clearly, not only constant dedication but inside knowledge, information organization skills and understanding of the socio-political context are a *sine qua non* for any participatory approach coordination team.

On the other hand, despite aiming at consolidating a not very large SG, the diversity of SG members implied that it was not always straightforward to reach consensus, particularly when it was necessary to refine action plans. The SG prepared a list of development measures or projects that lacked the degree of specificity and strategic purpose which could secure external funding. The latter suggests that technical assistance is also necessary to improve the end result. However, In the case of the Drina-Tara experience, the issue seemed not to be a need of more resources for training of stakeholders (who repeatedly said they had received enough training and externally driven strategy drafting), but the necessity of providing stakeholders with enough time to apply analytical tools (i.e. tree analysis, SWOT analyses, etc.), agree on strategies and further refine their action plans and subsequent implementation time frames. If over-training is to be avoided, it needs to be ensured that stakeholders possess the relevant skills to intervene and put forward the key challenges affecting their specific sector, while also being able to establish linkages and find innovative solutions. Again, this requires an effective SG selection mechanism, as well as substantial engagement of resources in terms of skilled personnel in the animation team and more time for the implementation of participatory approaches. In any case, even with skilled animators and well-informed stakeholders, participatory processes require sufficient time for involving stakeholders, for debating, for building trust (particularly in cross-border, post-conflict settings) and creating ownership of the process.

Since the ABD methodology lacks an institutional follow-up component, experiences from the European Territorial Cooperation field (such as institutional aspects of Interreg and other regional policy programs) were taken into account to inspire stakeholders. Clearly, the promotion of ABD and most *bottom-up* approaches rely on donor support. Logically, each donor has its own procedures and follows different methods depending on their need to justify their use of resources to their authorities and citizens. This does not necessarily fit with results from participatory exercises. However, one way forward is for stakeholder representatives to bring forward well-defined development project proposals. Still, the absence of strong long- or medium-term stable perspectives for financing as well as the probability that financial counterparts will express their own priorities, weakens the overall process of ABD programming, in particular the most detailed parts (concrete action plan and their output monitoring).

To overcome these issues, the 14 municipalities of the Drina-Tara area entered into an informal but permanent commitment in the form of a cross-border Drina-Tara Network

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<sup>11</sup> For example, in the Drina-Tara experience, local coordinators had to ensure that the local language was not defined as 'Serb', 'Bosnian' or 'Montenegrin'.

supported by a Memorandum of Understanding. Stakeholders from the Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and private sector also expressed their wish to continue collaborating under the format of an informal network. Lastly, the Standing Working Group-Regional Rural Development (SWG RRD)<sup>12</sup> offered to serve as an institutional umbrella to facilitate funding (mainly under the IPA CBC components) and promote the execution of the different action plans envisaged in the ABD program of the Drina-Tara area. The Network thus has a local component (SG), contacts at the national level (with links to the three countries involved), and access to the international community with the help of SWG-RRD. Their objective is to push forward the identified development initiatives that have been promoted and seek funding.

***Delphi group (DG): linking top-down and bottom-up approaches***

One of the main challenges of the ABD and other *bottom-up* approaches is to fit locally developed initiatives with the macro-situation (e.g. higher-level institutions, national level policies, national and international markets). Given the need to ensure a proper link with *top-down* national policies, the establishment of a group of experts familiar with national policies and an international perspective to local problems was considered not only valuable but of strategic relevance. The so-called Delphi group (DG) was therefore consolidated with the aim of providing a 'helicopter view' that combined oversight and insight in terms of: (i) helping to identify the core issues for a *bottom-up* approach to local development, that is, opportunities and challenges, and (ii) harmonising the project's objectives and development activities with the wider regional/national development programs of all participating countries, as well as international challenges in the wider Western Balkans region. The main idea was to facilitate the introduction of a *top-down* perspective, so that an adequate synergy between the *bottom-up* and *top-down* perspectives could be ensured and the ABD intervention's potential of success could be increased as a consequence.

The DG had 11 members, of which four represented national authorities (relevant ministries for rural development aspects), five came from academia, and two were experts in fields related to regional economics, agriculture and sustainable development. It was expected that their first-hand knowledge on national strategies, academic findings and the situation of the rural areas in their countries would be a determining factor in the evolution of the project. In addition, it was expected that the working areas of the experts filled gaps in the local actors' experience. Their ability to understand the context- and area-specific obstacles informed SG discussions via written reports which were reviewed by the coordination team in order to avoid direct interference and any paternalistic approaches or censorship of *bottom-up* initiatives emerging from SG discussions.

The DG did not meet physically but was intended to meet for regular interaction via email and/or through a web-based platform. However, there were difficulties in securing timely

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<sup>12</sup> SWG RRD is an International Intergovernmental Organization, consisted of governmental institutions responsible for rural development in respective countries and territories of South Eastern Europe

feedback and effective participation from the international and national group of experts. Although the contributions of the Delphi group helped to address conflicting priorities (e.g. hydro-electricity national priorities versus agriculture, and tourism versus agriculture), the processing of their reports implied substantial workload to the coordination team who also had to disseminate results to stakeholders. Moreover, in certain cases, different experts expressed opposing opinions (e.g. perception of the importance/appropriateness of organic production and related actions). Likewise it was difficult to avoid a certain degree of paternalism, which can lead to mistrust from local stakeholders. It is highly probable that, as in stakeholder interaction and consultation, national authorities and development experts from the DG also required more time to evaluate and propose measures as well as stronger coordination efforts from the team were needed so that the DG output could further support SG debates. Overall, the exercise has also proved that, despite all the genuine efforts, information (on programs, strategies etc. adopted at national or regional level) does not flow easily down to the field and stakeholders, and more time should be devoted to the harmonization of inputs between DG and SG members. In future experiences it is recommended to devote more resources to securing timely feedback from external development experts and general access to national strategy documents.

***Questionnaire-based surveys: data collection and its external analysis to support bottom-up processes***

Two questionnaire-based surveys supported the ABD program development in the Drina-Tara target region. The first one was held with the objective of gaining a general understanding of the development situation as perceived by a wider audience. Open questions were prepared in order to assess what were the most pressing development needs as perceived by 'the average citizen'. The open questions aimed also at collecting some qualitative information in order to have a clearer picture of the socio-economic situation at the local level, considering the lack of data. The results were thus particularly useful to the discussions of SG members when deciding on key priority areas. A second questionnaire was launched in order to assess whether the identified priorities and action plans of the SG were compatible and acceptable to a larger group of multi-sector representatives from the target area. In contrast to the first questionnaire which aimed at collecting the opinions of the public on the priorities regarding local development, the second questionnaire focused on receiving an institutional and expertise feedback from the organizations that were in charge of addressing the priorities identified by the SG. In general, the use of community surveys proved useful to understand the opinion of the general public, thus broadening the input of selected stakeholders but also to obtain additional information on the development situation of the target area.

Another activity undertaken in the target area referred to sharing not only the results of the community surveys with the general public but also inform of the tasks and objectives achieved by the group of stakeholders from the 14 different municipalities. The latter proved on one hand to strengthen the sense of a rural cross border community while also advertising the development initiatives and opening the doors to other interested parties in the target area. To summarize, the promotion of additional participatory events such as

community surveys or open meetings are rather useful in integrating the information from different sources, in double checking whether the target community in fact shared the analyses of the SG , and in complementing the baseline assessment of the development situation in the Drina-Tara area.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The present case study has provided insights on how to adapt the ABD approach to the context of rural, post-conflict and cross-border areas. The paper has focused on the specific participatory mechanisms which were adjusted in order to address context-specific challenges and potentially increase success rates in similar target areas. Improvements were related to data collection processes (via community survey and local expert knowledge), introduction of a diverse group of stakeholders who held dynamic participatory events, and the indirect connection to local/international experts (which included government officials) in order to promote synergies between local, national and international actions.

Specifically, the implementation of an ABD in the Drina Tara context included:

- promotion and coordination of the interaction between different administrative levels (intra-municipality, inter-municipality and cross-border), and between actors from the civil society, public and private sectors, to ensure unbiased participation;
- establishment of a sense of cross-border community and effective participation of key stakeholders in the elaboration of a development strategy and action plan in order to genuinely focus on the needs and priorities of the community;
- introduction of efficient linkages between *bottom-up* and *top-down* initiatives, to guarantee coherence with the macro-situation;
- creation of medium- to long-term organizational mechanisms, to ensure sustainability of the project outcomes as the coordination/animation team abandoned the target area (exit strategy).

A series of recommendations arise from the implementation of the ABD approach in a rural, post-conflict and cross border target area:

- (i) the *area delineation* process needs careful consideration in order to cover all similar sub-regions in terms of development problematic without reaching a size where a participatory process would be impossible to implement, nor excluding key players;
- (ii) the *bottom-up process* and its momentum – guidance should be offered to people involved in this process so that they understand the nature of their roles and how they are inter-related. Development proposals should be prepared in detail for which technical assistance and sufficient time are required. Although under the ABD approach proposals (related to major changes in legal frameworks or border/custom/trade laws) which cannot be addressed at the area level are expected to be excluded from the analyses, stakeholders should not refrain from expressing clearly their needs in these issues and should be sufficiently motivated in order to continue interacting after the official end of

the ABD intervention so that these matters may be referred to higher political-administrative levels;

(iii) the *top-down* accompanying framework of the participatory process must be openly discussed. Information flows should be improved and one way to do so is to put further support and coordination efforts in the well-functioning of DG members, possibly with an increase in the physical interaction with local level stakeholders.

(iv) the *institutional and legal framework* needed to ensure the sustainability of a cross-border approach of this kind should be reinforced.

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