

# Give & Take

A Journal on Civil Society in Eurasia

Winter 1999  
Vol. 2 / Issue 1



**Grassroots Activism  
East and West**



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ISAR promotes citizen participation and the development of the nongovernmental sector in the countries of the former Soviet Union by supporting citizen activists and grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in their efforts to create just and sustainable societies.

ISAR's offices work to facilitate partnerships between and among NGOs in Eurasia and the United States, and to educate the public in the US and Eurasia about the unique role that grassroots organizations play in shaping a positive transformation in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

**ISAR History**

Established in 1983 by Harriett Crosby and Nancy Graham as the Institute for Soviet-American Relations, ISAR originally served as a clearinghouse on US-USSR citizen exchange and published the journal *Surviving Together* until the end of 1997.

More information about ISAR's programs is available on our web site, [www.isar.org](http://www.isar.org).

To find out how to receive **Give & Take**, please see the back cover.

**On the Cover:** Citizens march in defense of local rivers during a demonstration in Nizhni Novgorod. Photo courtesy of Help the River Project.

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# Grassroots Activism: Mobilizing Communities Locally and Globally

**F**or three weeks last fall, ISAR hosted a group of eight women from Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine as part of an exchange focused on women's leadership and environmental health. The primary goal of the program was to introduce the visitors to US activists dealing with environmental health problems in their communities. The program included visits with national and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Washington, DC, a "grassroots tour" across Pennsylvania, a leadership training and mini-internships with grassroots organizations.

The women's exchange inspired this issue of *Give & Take*. It gave us a chance to look at grassroots activism in the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the US, and the ways that international exchange can energize and enhance local efforts. The articles in this issue, most written by participants, illustrate the main issues facing grassroots activists in both parts of the world. We include articles by and about groups in the FSU, as well as in the US, in order to illustrate the similarities and differences in their experience.

Citizen participation and grassroots organizing have a very different history in the two parts of the world. The right of private citizens to come together in civic activity is enshrined in American national consciousness, whatever discomfiture such activity may cause to powerful government and corporate entities. In the FSU, on the other hand, collective citizen action was against the law until very recently and NGOs today must struggle for legitimacy in the public eye.

At the more personal level, however, the women's leadership exchange demonstrated that grassroots leaders from both regions face many of the same problems. American and FSU activists alike face widespread apathy and must carefully cultivate community support. NGOs in both regions, especially those led by women, must constantly prove their professionalism and fight for a seat at the decision-making table. All of them seek better ways to attract allies and build coalitions to increase their efficacy and broaden their impact.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic shared by these women is their deep concern about the interrelatedness between health and the environment. The grave consequences of environmental pollution on the health of their children and families galvanized every one of them to action. Whether Lois Gibbs, Linda Price King or Irina Vikhristiuk, none of them dreamed of leading others in public opposition until they and their families began to suffer from some environmental disaster. Taking a leadership role was not easy for these women, but intense personal concern drove them to stand up to power and challenge passivity. Doing so changed their lives, their sense of themselves and, ultimately, the communities in which they lived.

Sharing their experience with people in the US gave the FSU participants in the ISAR exchange new understanding of their efforts at home. The US participants, in turn, gained a larger perspective on the problems in their communities. In the give and take of their dialogue they found refreshment and an unexpected understanding of how international links can inform and inspire grassroots activity.

## Russian NGOs Fight for Fair Taxation

by Yuri Dzhibladze

Nongovernmental organizations in Russia are under assault from harsh new tax legislation making its way through the Russian Duma. If adopted, these laws would deal a severe blow to Russian democracy and emerging civil society. Moreover, some 20 million people served by more than 60,000 Russian nonprofits would lose essential NGO support and face social dislocation and hardships. Given the collapse of the state's social safety net and severe shortage of government funds, many Russians would be left unaided if not for the work of the Third Sector.

The issue involves at least four pieces of legislation sponsored by the federal government that will affect personal income tax, payroll tax, value-added tax and foreign aid regulations. The documentation is complicated, voluminous and constantly changing—already including more than 2,000 amendments. The draft tax laws were originally submitted to the Duma last spring. In December, the laws were approved by the Duma on their first reading, and are expected to pass on their second and third readings in February. The legislation must then receive approval from the Duma's upper house and the president. Russia's cumbersome and inefficient tax system has long needed a complete overhaul, but the proposed legislation poses a significant threat to the work of nonprofits.

The main goal behind the new code is to improve tax collection by closing loopholes and ending various benefits and privileges. Unfortunately, the authors of the laws, along with the majority of Russian public officials, do not understand the nature of NGO work and put nonprofits in the same category as businesses. In fact, the status of nonprofit organizations is not sufficiently defined under current Russian law. In particular, no distinction is made between the for-profit activities of businesses and the commercial operations of

nonprofits, such as the selling of used clothing, postcards or books to cover overhead expenses.

The proposed legislative changes would double or quadruple taxation of nonprofits: twice on the receiving end and twice more on the service-providing end. Thus, donations coming to NGOs, including membership fees, private and corporate donations, and foundation grants, would be taxed by the receiving NGO as income at the rate of 33 percent, while the donor would have to pay a 15 percent value-added tax. Money, goods and services provided by NGOs to other organizations or the general public, including services provided for free, would be taxed to the recipient at 12 to 35 percent and to the service provider at 15 percent. In a nutshell, under the anticipated legislation, Russian NGOs will not be allowed to make grants or function as service organizations, regranteeing to other more vulnerable entities, using funds obtained from Western donors or providing services to the needy.

The situation seems absurd; after all, individuals and NGOs are helping those whom the government cannot help, and yet the government is proposing to generate funds from this charitable activity, thus depriving nonprofits of any chance for survival.

Moreover, under the Duma's proposed new law on foreign aid, all foreign donors, including foundations, NGOs, foreign governments and intergovernmental agencies, would be put through an exhaustive bureaucratic accreditation process in order to receive tax-exempt status. Furthermore, foreign aid would be limited to a narrow list of charitable purposes, which would exclude areas such as promoting democratic institutions, the rule of law, human rights monitoring, protection of refugees and promotion of independent media. NGOs do not oppose regulation of foreign grantmaking by tax authorities, but do object to complicated procedures that discourage giving.

Why is this happening at a time when foreign aid is needed more than ever? Although more than 60,000 NGOs have emerged in the eight years since the 1991 coup and have garnered public respect, some conservative elements of society and the government view NGOs with suspicion. Citizens victimized by numerous pyramid and lottery schemes promoted by phony front organizations do not always know whom to trust. They are dismayed by the improper granting of tax exemptions to Mafia-like sports and veterans' associations whose scandals have been well-covered in the press. Despite substantial progress since the Soviet era, the Russian government continues to be particularly suspicious of NGOs and independent civic initiatives, often viewing NGOs as a threat to their power and control over resources. The Duma has also been reluctant to have NGOs assume responsibility for social services, since it exposes the inability of the state to cope with Russia's growing social ills.

Regrettably, one of the factors causing the current crisis is IMF pressure on Russia to reform its tax code. This package of legislation has already undergone extensive, sometimes contradictory, amendments. The failure to protect nonprofit activity in the current package is partly due to the inexpert and hasty manner in which the drafting and public consultations have taken place.

### **The NGO Response**

Russian nonprofits and their constituencies have responded to the threat by engaging in an advocacy campaign. The grassroots campaign, launched and coordinated by the Moscow-based Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (CDDHR), has grown since September 1998 into a broad-based, nationwide effort under the slogan "We do not ask for special benefits, we demand fair taxation!" The Center has been able to bring together leading experts in economics, taxes, law, accounting and NGO development, who have provided critical analysis of the proposed legislation. They have also developed amendments to the draft laws, which have been submitted to the Duma through sympathetic

deputies. The Center's representatives have organized a number of briefings and public events and have met with government officials and Duma deputies on a weekly basis over the past several months.

CDDHR has also built a coalition of several hundred groups from all over Russia. Involving NGOs in more than 35 Russian provinces, the campaign has brought public attention to the role of NGOs in society. More than 8,000 letters and appeals have been sent to the Duma and the federal government as well as to governors and local legislatures by NGOs and the citizens they serve. Dozens of provincial and national newspapers have covered the issue.

While the fate of the tax legislation has yet to be decided, the campaign against the unjust taxation of NGOs has already provided a service to Russian grassroots activists, uniting them in a nationwide, cross-sectoral endeavor and giving them the chance to practice democracy in its essence. ●

A more detailed version of this article is available on ISAR's website at [www.isar.org](http://www.isar.org).

*Yuri Dzhibladze is a Russian citizen and a recent graduate of Columbia University's International Affairs program. In 1998, Dzhibladze founded the CDDHR, a Moscow-based nongovernmental public policy and advocacy organization. He has been active in the grassroots democracy movement since the mid-1980s.*

*The author would like to thank Catherine Fitzpatrick, executive director of the International League for Human Rights, New York, NY, for assistance in preparing this article. In addition, he would like to thank Ms. Fitzpatrick and a number of US colleagues for providing their support to the campaign. If you would like to support the Center's work, please contact Ms. Fitzpatrick at [cfitz@ilhr.org](mailto:cfitz@ilhr.org) to arrange a tax-deductible donation.*

# Belarusian Women Defend Human Rights and the Environment

by *Valentina Kovtun*

**A** MIDST DETERIORATING CONDITIONS for democracy, the women's movement in Belarus has emerged as a force for protecting human rights, and increasingly, the environment. Belarus declared its independence in 1992, but remnants of the Soviet Union can still be seen

in the country's neocommunist ideology and in the consequences of environmental disasters such as Chernobyl, which contaminated 25 percent of Belarus' territory. The Soviet legacy has contributed to economic and social instability in Belarus, helping the country's totalitarian government generate support and stifling early hopes for democracy. Today, Belarusians holding nonconformist views are often targeted, as in the widely-publicized case of reporter Pavel Sheremet, who was stripped of his media accreditation after writing an article critical of the government. However, the emerging Belarusian dictatorship has, in fact, galvanized many groups, including those involved in the women's movement.

In the early to mid-90s, the women's movement in Belarus involved only a small number of women who created the country's first women's NGOs and promoted

women's issues through a series of gender seminars in Minsk. In 1996, these women hosted Belarus' first international women's congress, which explored new options for protecting women's rights, including improving public access to information and studying potential legal protections. As a result of events like the congress, support for the women's movement began to spread to sleepy Belarusian towns in remote rural areas.

Women throughout Belarus started to protest human rights violations and government restrictions. A

group of Belarusian women including historians, representatives of the major opposition group, the Belarus Popular Front, and women who had personally suffered from political repression became founding members of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee to address human rights issues. The Working Women's Association joined the scene and organized a series of protests against the feminization of poverty in Belarus. Today, the number of Belarusian women's organizations has grown to approximately 30, providing a model for female leadership and helping women become active. Thanks in part to the movement, the press has increasingly carried articles on gender issues, thus improving the public image of women. The movement has also served to unite people, transcending ethnic, religious and even political barriers.

Women leaders began to stop relying on the government and started addressing many problems on their own. Many turned their attention to the problems connected with Chernobyl and the environment and began to consider the idea of creating an umbrella organization that would include both women's and environmental groups. Belarus already had environmental groups with women in leadership positions, such as the organizations *Belaya Rus*, *Next Stop-New Life* and the *Students' Environmental League*. However, these organizations had never been active in the growing women's movement.

One of the first steps towards consolidating the two movements was made in 1997, when the Belarusian women's organization **St. Yefrosinya Polotskaya Fund** hosted the international conference, "Women in the Ecocide Zone." Conference participants included women from Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Lithuania, Russia and the US, who came together for the first time to discuss the impact of Chernobyl. Newspapers picked up the issue and helped generate broad public support. Seeing the need for ongoing action, several conference participants formed the first Belarusian women's educational center, also called *Women in the Ecocide Zone*.

Ten years ago, pro-democracy forces united under the banner of Chernobyl and organized a series of mass

Vasyl Artushenko, IREX/ProMedia

Protesters with "Chernobyl" headbands.

demonstrations to protest the Soviet government and its irresponsible policies. Today, the environmental movement is again joining forces with the democracy movement, bringing together disparate fields such as environmental law, gender education and women's role in civil society. Since Belarusians are the population most affected by Chernobyl, they must develop a "Chernobyl world view" and learn how to safeguard their rights and their lives. The lack of knowledge about environmental protection, people's inability to protect their rights and the lack of stability in the country lead to widespread apathy. Women's organizations are increasingly realizing the need for education programs on environmental protection and legal issues to combat this sense of disempowerment. The St.

Yefrosinya Polotskaya Fund, for example, is in the process of organizing a School for Rights, where women will be taught to protect their rights, including the right to a clean environment. The Fund hopes that the school will generate support not only in major cities, but also in the provinces, where women's NGOs are less active. Women's groups hope that linking the environment with women's issues will create a new understanding of citizen responsibility in Belarus, drawing women and young people to the work of protecting human rights and the quality of life. ●

*Valentina Kovtun is founder and president of the Belarusian women's fund, St. Yefrosinya Polotskaya. Translated by Andrew Reese.*

## An American Woman's Road to Activism

*based on an interview with Linda Price King by Amy Forster and Miranda Lutyens*

**T**WENTY YEARS AGO, LINDA PRICE King was a self-described "domestic engineer," raising young children and working part time. When she and her family moved to Nitro, a small industrialized town in West Virginia, they found a wonderful house for the perfect price. Soon after, King and her family started noticing strange smells in the air and odd colors in the sky—emissions from the six different chemical companies located down the hill from their house. "The smell was so bad that we couldn't sleep at night," King recalls. "It got so bad that we'd have to leave our home for a day or two at a time." Then King's children became ill, and soon after her own health started to deteriorate. She began having odd symptoms, including severe swelling and rashes. When King appealed to doctors, they responded with indifference. Explains King, "They would say to me, 'Don't worry, we see this all the time.' They'd tell me it was my nerves and that I should go home and take tranquilizers and bake brownies."

When King became so sick and fatigued she could not continue her job, she began reaching out to her neighbors to find out if they were suffering from the same sorts of symptoms. Some acknowledged having similar problems, while others questioned why she was so upset, telling her it had been much worse before. "And then there were the people who thought that I was messing with the status quo, that I was going to turn over the apple cart."

King moved from inquiry to action, carrying out a community health survey. She found that people who

had never smoked or lived in a smoking household were suffering from lung cancer and determined that the number of people with rare chronic diseases was extremely high. Armed with data, King approached the town's chemical companies, demanding information about their emissions. Today, industry is required by law to make information about factory emissions public, but twenty years ago no such laws existed. King obtained information from officials solely because she was persistent. At the time, she had no idea that in her efforts to gather information from industry she was serving as a pioneer for the environmental justice movement.

Ultimately, health problems drove King and her family away from Nitro. Resettling first in Ohio and then in Louisiana, King became increasingly involved in grassroots activism, seeking out people who were fighting to protect their communities. This search for like-minded individuals quickly expanded into a larger quest for information and accountability. Working on incinerator issues in Ohio, King became confident enough to take on industry experts; by the time she moved to Louisiana, King was already recognized as a real threat to industries trying to avoid community scrutiny. She was asked to become the Southern regional coordinator for the Citizen's Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste, the organization founded by Lois Gibbs following the campaign against hazardous waste at Love Canal. In this position, King traveled throughout the South, drawing on her own experience to teach skills and strategies for community organizing.

**Today, industry is required by law to make information about factory emissions public, but twenty years ago no such laws existed. King obtained information from officials solely because she was persistent.**

**“If you spoke out, you were a lone voice in the woods. People didn’t believe you, because number one, you were a woman, and number two, you weren’t a scientist.”**

In 1989, King founded her own organization, the **Environmental Health Network** (EHN). In creating the Network, which was to focus solely on health-related issues facing communities, she hoped to provide local citizens with the tools and the knowledge to take action, both in response to existing problems and as a means of preventing future illness and suffering. King built EHN’s programs around her understanding of community empowerment. “What disempowers communities is bringing in scientists and researchers with their own interests to conduct studies that will sit on a shelf,” she says, referring to much of the government-funded environmental health research carried out in the US. “In many cases, they use the wrong tools and never end up finding anything wrong. There is a lack of political will to identify problems, and a paternalistic dynamic to the relations between researchers and communities.” King believes that relating to a community in this way simply adds to the culture of dependency. People become more and more passive, convinced that they have nothing to contribute to solving their own problems.

King’s approach is to work directly with members of an affected community. Before agreeing to become involved, King screens the community to assess its level of commitment. “Many groups just want to be rescued. People have to own the process for it to be long-term and sustainable.” To help ensure local investment, EHN works with local grassroots groups, who serve as program partners. “I go into the community with a skeleton plan. We hold workshops where citizens are the ones developing the muscles, nerves and skin to go on the bones.” EHN works as an advisor, but the community decides what action will be taken.

### **Current Projects**

EHN is presently working with communities suffering from environmental health problems in Kellogg, Idaho; Oakridge, Tennessee; and Pottstown, Pennsylvania. All three projects have a similar purpose: helping community members identify possible routes of exposure by conducting community health surveys. Though the primary aim is to determine the sources of illness, EHN also tries to help individuals cope with their environment and health problems. EHN and partner groups have set up symptom registries to facilitate the long-term collection of data and have established clinics that use a common diagnostic protocol. An important aspect of EHN’s approach is engaging local physicians in their efforts. Doctors who become involved in the programs gain a better understanding of the connection between the environment and health. As a result, they are more likely to see

subtleties in patients’ symptoms that an average primary care physician might overlook. King believes that the greatest strength of the system registry is that community members view it as a local effort. Since the data collectors are neighbors, people are much more likely to open up and talk about health issues, which are often deeply personal. As a result, EHN’s data collection efforts can attract up to 90 percent participation, a success rate far greater than that of most government studies.

The level of support for EHN’s symptom registries and other efforts to trace the routes of exposure differs from community to community. King notes that EHN’s approach is rarely popular with government and corporate officials because it raises fears about litigation, money and control. While in Pottstown, the EHN-inspired effort has attracted a number of doctors and the mayor has been supportive, in the industry-dominated communities of Oakridge and Kellogg, it has been much harder to gain support from physicians and politicians.

In her capacity as a resource for community groups, King has heard stories of contamination, corporate blame shifting, political avoidance and uncooperative government agencies from all around the country: “Call after call every day, I keep I thinking I’ve heard it all. Then I get another call that’s even worse.” Nevertheless, King believes that prospects are improving for successful collection of health data and attribution of responsibility. “I think the tide is turning,” she comments.

Thinking back to the early days of her activist career, King recalls, “If you spoke out, you were a lone voice in the woods. People didn’t believe you, because number one, you were a woman, and number two, you weren’t a scientist.” While some scientists continue to promote the notion that chemicals create a better life, King is heartened by the increase in evidence that chemicals pose serious danger to human health. Further, King believes that it is women who have given a face to the environmental justice movement over the past 20 years. Everyday she encounters women whose histories mirror her own. “They started out as housewives and have grown into leaders, speaking out on important issues.” King feels that women, both in the US and around the world, have gained this power by following their instincts, their passions and their belief in what is right. ●

*Amy Forster is a managing editor of Give & Take. Miranda Lutyens is ISAR’s Partnership and Exchange program manager.*

# Moldovan Activist Meets American Grassroots Hero

*an interview with Lois Gibbs by Natalia Cravciuc*

Natalia Cravciuc is president of the **Gutta-Club Center for Children**, a Moldovan umbrella organization that supports children's environmental organizations throughout the country. Gutta-Club coordinates a wide range of activities, from publishing a children's environmental newspaper to working with children to organize public information campaigns on environmental issues. Part of Cravciuc's work includes reaching out to other organizations and finding ways to incorporate new ideas into Gutta's programming. On a recent trip to the US, Cravciuc had the opportunity to interview Lois Gibbs, Love Canal activist and founder of the **Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ)**, formerly the Citizen's Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering local communities in the fight for environmental justice.

## **How did you become active in the movement for environmental justice?**

I was born into a fairly poor family and I swore to myself that when I had children, I would build a wonderful life for them. I got married and gave birth to a boy, Michael, and at first, my life could not have gone better. My husband and I bought a house in 1974 and decided that we were living the American dream. Then tragedy struck. Shortly after moving to a new neighborhood, Michael, who was a year and a half at the time, was diagnosed with epilepsy, asthma, a deficient immune system and weak kidneys. When I asked why my child was so sick, the pediatrician had no answers. Then we had a daughter, Melissa, who was born healthy, but was subsequently diagnosed with hemophilia. Both my husband and I were young, healthy people with no history of illness, and when the children got sick, we couldn't figure out why. We decided that the children needed more walks outside and Sunday school.

## **I suspect that neither the walks nor Sunday school helped.**

Of course not. The cause of their illnesses remained a mystery for us until 1978, when the local paper ran a piece about Love Canal. It turned out that Love Canal, a toxic waste dump, was just three blocks from my house and right next to Michael's school. In my mind, I made the connection between the dump

and the children's illnesses. The first thing I did was to go to Michael's school and request that they transfer him. They refused, and the school's administrator said to me, 'Mrs. Gibbs, if you love your children so much, why don't you go home and take care of them instead of wasting your time in my office?' Although the thought that my own government would not protect me seemed blasphemous, I began to realize that the authorities did not care about me or my children.

**Americans, particularly those of the older generation, believe that the government is sacred. It must have been terrible for you to think that your rights were being violated and that the government didn't care. What did you do?**

courtesy of CHEJ

Lois Gibbs with her daughter, Melissa.

I decided to go door-to-door and start a petition to close the school. I was very shy, and the thought of approaching total strangers was difficult for me. I knocked on the first door so quietly no one heard and the dog didn't even bark. I thought, 'What am I doing here?' and went back home. Society had taught us that homemakers are dull, limited creatures. I knew I was not like that, but I still had a complex.

**But you went back again?**

Yes, but it was because of Michael. He became seriously ill with pneumonia, and I realized that I was to blame because I had made the cowardly decision to

let things lie. On the one hand, I was afraid that people would despise me or call me a troublemaker, and on the other hand, my son was sick. That was when I made my decision.

When Michael got better and returned

home, I was ready to collect signatures. I dressed up nicely and began to knock on my neighbors' doors again. They did not chase me away and they did not insult me; it turned out that they were facing the same problem I was. People began to tell me about their sick children and sometimes even took me to their basements to show me where foul-smelling toxic water had collected. Together we decided to form the 99th Street School Parents' Movement, a local initiative working for the school's closure. The more we talked, the more terrifying things we learned: a 13-year-old girl was operated on for cancer of the reproductive organs; twelve women living next door to each other were diagnosed with breast cancer; several children were born with the same birth defects. When people asked me what to do, I didn't have an answer. At that point, I was just collecting information.

I learned that a company called Occidental Chemical headed by the match king Armand Hammer was responsible for the Love Canal dump. Since the company was the main employer in the county, Hammer had a lot of influence. When the local paper covered Love Canal, it's tone was very cautious.

Then I found a 1976 report on Love Canal put together by a consulting company that described the costs of cleaning up the dump. They estimated the cost of the cleanup at \$20 million and followed this with long columns of numbers. My husband, as a worker, was valued at \$10,000, but my daughter and I were not worth anything. Adding everyone together, they calculated that the whole community was worth less \$20 million and on that basis they decided not to clean up the dump. In other words, they put a monetary value on our lives and made the decision that was profitable for them. I was determined that no one, not even Armand Hammer, would take away my right to give my children a better future.

**So this prompted you to move from studying the problem and circulating petitions to more radical action?**

Exactly. In 1978, we created the Love Canal Home Owner's Association and began to hold meetings, put up posters and hand out leaflets. Under pressure from us, the state health department agreed to begin evacuating residents from Love Canal on August 2, 1978. Unfortunately, they decided that of 239 families, the first to be evacuated would be pregnant women and families with children under two. So because Melissa was two-and-a-half, we were going to have to stay. They justified their decision by saying that the toxins were particularly dangerous for very small children, but we knew that older children had already accumulated an enormous amount of poisons in their bodies, putting them at even greater risk.

When the news got out, hundreds of residents gathered by the school. The scene was like something from a horror film: people were waving torches and burning the deeds to their homes; pregnant women were having hysterics; everyone was yelling and crying. I heard my neighbor's voice over the loudspeaker, 'Lois will come up now and give us an answer.' I didn't have any answers, but I started talking anyway. I said that we needed to organize to ensure that all families be

Vasyl Artyushenko, IREX/ProMedia

**Children at a Chernobyl protest. Threats to children often galvanize adults into action and activism.**

evacuated, that we could not allow them to divide us. I said that the government and Occidental Chemicals should pay us for moving, and the community agreed with me.

A week after our meeting, the authorities decided to move almost everyone out. They drew a line around the dump and said that everyone who lived inside the line would be resettled, and everyone who lived outside wouldn't. My house didn't make the cut, and I knew perfectly well that the decision had been political rather than scientific. Chemicals are not held back by imaginary lines.

**After so much work, it must have been hard to wind up outside the line. Did you eventually get resettled?**

The next February, the governor evacuated 700 families in addition to the original 239. But we did not rest on our laurels, and continued the protests. We worked a great deal with the media. This was when President Jimmy Carter was up for re-election, and we got the press to publish articles and air spots on Love

Canal. Each piece ended with 'Carter allowed this!' This campaign played a decisive role, and the result was that Carter himself came to see us and officially promised to resettle everyone. Becoming a part of the election coverage helped us win.

**What other factors contributed to your success?**

The fact that our struggle was built on common sense. We weren't professionals, but we got people to stand up for their rights. If you raise your head and begin a dialogue, you acquire the same authority as those with whom you are speaking. The main thing is to begin, and the side that convinces the public wins. If you are an environmentalist, the public has one stereotype about you. If you are an ecofeminist, they have another stereotype. When you are fighting for justice, there is no stereotype and you can involve the greatest number of people. In order to win the larger battle, we need the movement to be encompassing so we can move forward together.

*At the conclusion of the interview, Cravciuc shared some of her thoughts. She explained, "Women from around the world are united by their love for their children. Regardless of the threat—whether from Love Canal, from pesticides in fruits and vegetables in my country Moldova, or from Chernobyl in Ukraine and Belarus—a mother will do anything to protect her children. Women are the most reliable allies in the battle for environmental justice because they know what is at stake. More and more women on both sides of the ocean are getting involved in these issues, and as long as mothers love their children, the fight for environmental justice will continue." ●*

*Translated by Andrew Reese.*

## Creative Fundraising in Crimea

Created in response to the Chernobyl catastrophe, the Crimea-based **Gaia Children's and Youth Environmental Association** has existed since 1986. Gaia has a broad mandate, with its primary interests including environmental education, nature and park conservation, independent environmental monitoring and research on the effect of pollution on human health. With limited funds and such a wide range of concerns, Gaia has learned to take advantage of every potential resource.

Gaia has sponsored many different activities, from compiling handbooks on biomonitoring techniques to organizing environmental street theater. In 1995, Gaia held an environmental camp with ecologists from Sevastopol, Rovno and the Donbass region to research

the condition of the Baidarskii Nature Preserve and clean up public recreation sites and other polluted areas. The following year, a Gaia camp helped the Sevastopol and Kuibyshev Forest Service prevent forest fires, collecting tinder from the forests and distributing it to needy

courtesy of Harmony with Nature

**Teenagers explore nature at a camp in Ukraine.**

families and the disabled. Gaia also organized a campaign against a Crimean thermal plant, conducting research to show the connection between the plant's emissions and the failing health of the neighboring population. Gaia then disseminated these findings to local authorities and residents.

With such a variety of programs, Gaia faces many financial demands and must constantly search for funds. Realizing that support can take many forms, Gaia's leaders began to look for creative ways to finance their work. When they decided to host a tree-planting event on Earth Day, Gaia persuaded the Sevastopol Forest Service to provide the saplings. Gaia also signed a long-term agreement to maintain beaches for the Sevastopol and Kuibyshev Forest Service in exchange for the use of heated cabins in the park's off-season.

When Gaia leaders decided to establish a permanent base for their camps, they again approached the management of the Kuibyshev State Forest. Gaia had a

relationship with the Kuibyshev staff, having sponsored several cleanups and patrols of forest lands. In 1997, Gaia was able to convince forest authorities to sign a 25-year, legally binding contract with the park. The contract entitled Gaia to the year-round use of the Peredovoye Forest Cordon, a site with a variety of habitats and aquatic ecosystems. Gaia was then able to set up a permanent environmental center on the site, inviting Gaia members and young people from neighboring villages to help.

Due to the high cost of communications, transportation and supplies, Gaia continues to face financial difficulties. However, creative thinking has allowed the organization to carry on with its work despite a shortage of funds. ●

-Natalia Kumysh is director of Gaia and an ecology teacher at Sevastopol school No. 37. Translated by Andrew Reese.

## Promoting Community Involvement Against the Odds

by Irina Vikhristiuk

ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES facing the environmental movement is public apathy. **Vozrozhdeniye** (Renaissance), an environmental NGO fighting for the restoration of a contaminated region in

Southern Ukraine, has found that confronting apathy does not require elaborate strategies or scare tactics. Instead, Vozrozhdeniye members have realized that taking practical action and educating the next generation can inspire public involvement in environmental protection.

The environmental problems confronting Vozrozhdeniye grew out of a well-intentioned, but badly conceived, technological experiment that has had disastrous environmental consequences. In the early 1970s, the Soviet government proposed to improve agricultural production in the region by building canals connecting the Danube, Dnieper and Dniester Rivers. The intention was to convert the estuaries of the northwestern Black Sea coast into freshwater reservoirs for irrigation. The first part of the project was to dam the Sassyk estuary. The project failed miserably. The water behind the dam became highly salinized and stagnant, accumulating agricultural run-off, household and industrial waste. Attempts to use the water for



irrigation transformed 75,000 acres of rich farmland into sterile wasteland within a few years.

The local residents are the ones who have suffered from this experiment gone wrong. Twenty years of contamination turned a region once known for its abundant wildlife and natural beauty into an environmental disaster area. Life expectancy and fertility have fallen, the number of children with birth defects has increased and an entire ecosystem is disappearing. Thousands of villagers have been forced to leave their homes because they can no longer use their water for irrigation or household purposes.

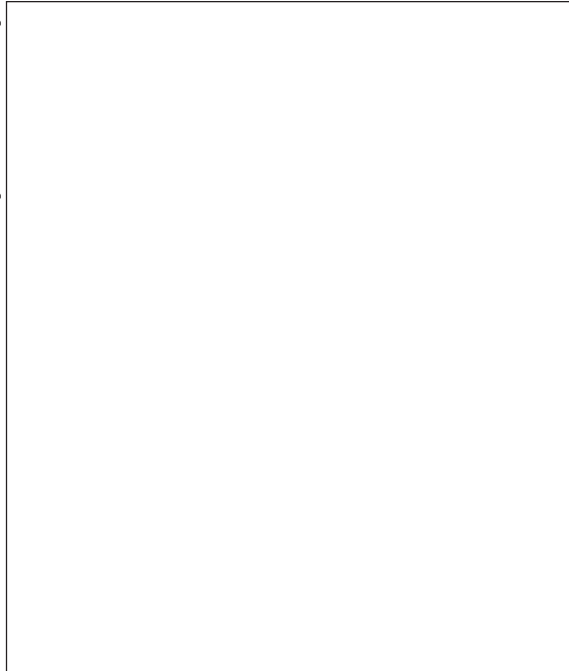
Local residents had occasionally voiced concern about the deteriorating conditions, but it was not until two teenagers died from leukemia that the citizens took action. The deaths prompted a group of local doctors to join with community members to form Vozrozhdeniye in 1996. Group members began by trying to obtain the results of environmental research commissioned by local officials, but when they found that data was marked “for official use only,” they mobilized and sought support from the community. They conducted a survey and found that 97 percent of the 5,000 respondents supported removing the dam enclosing Sassyk and returning the region to its natural state as a brackish estuary.

Vozrozhdeniye found broad support for its work, yet still had difficulty mobilizing the public into action. In order to understand this contradiction, one must examine the activities and motivations of the governmental and nongovernmental organizations working to improve the environment.

Unfortunately, the government organizations commissioned to solve environmental problems include many individuals whose main concern is making a living. These people are generally unwilling to take the responsibility that comes with their positions. Although these agencies may employ scientists who understand the problems and make plans to address them, they are unable to generate community support due to severe lack of financial resources. As a result, important issues tend to fade from the agenda. As they fade, the public loses confidence and becomes cynical about the possibility of the government ever solving the problem.

By contrast, environmental activists approach environmental pollution as a problem to be solved.

courtesy of Vozrozhdeniye



**Environmentalists are concerned about Sassyk’s diseased fish populations.**

They address apathy by seeking practical solutions. They have a clear vision of what must be done and try to set realistic goals for achieving their vision. Once they achieve a goal, they are more knowledgeable and prepared to plan for the next steps. They understand that concrete results are a much more effective weapon against apathy than creating elaborate plans to attack the apathy itself.

Vozrozhdeniye’s objective, therefore, was not to confront community indifference directly, but rather to help nature recover and educate the people in the region about their rights to a safe environment. They realized that demagoguery, moralizing or scare tactics would have little effect since people had long ago become weary of promises from government bureaucrats and politicians. What they needed to see were results.

Once Vozrozhdeniye had learned from its survey that it had wide public support for action, it determined that it was necessary to obtain reliable information about the water, soil and other ecological conditions in the area. Since official research results were not available, Vozrozhdeniye invited other independent scientists to monitor the situation and used its journal, *ECO Bulletin*, to share results with the community.

**The local residents are the ones who have suffered from this experiment gone wrong. Twenty years of contamination turned a region once known for its abundant wildlife and natural beauty into an environmental disaster area.**

However, it has not been enough simply to make the information available to people. Given the serious economic difficulties in the region, most people have little interest in environmental issues since they do not see them as critical to their survival. This is why a large part of Vozrozhdeniye's work involves environmental education for children.

Vozrozhdeniye and other environmental NGOs understood that children were more open to learning about the natural world than adults, and that ignoring the role of children in the environmental movement created the risk of condemning future generations to repeat previous mistakes. With little money in the school system to support extracurricular environmental clubs, NGOs have taken the lead in supporting such activities. Understanding local environmental problems not only enhances young people's respect for all living things, but also teaches them about their personal responsibility for protecting nature.

The general lack of understanding among adults of the interdependence between ecological problems and human health helps to explain why one of the biggest challenges to the environmental movement is not a lack of funding, as many NGOs complain, but an

insufficient number of people taking initiative to find solutions to the critical problems. Although Ukraine has declared itself a democratic country, where people must participate in the decision-making process, the state still has not created laws to encourage public participation.

Vozrozhdeniye is trying to stimulate public participation by working at two levels. On the one hand, it is conducting research to gather the type of irrefutable information that will allow it to appeal effectively to all levels of government. At the same time, it works to educate the public at large through a variety of programs, with particular emphasis on the younger generation. Once an organization has achieved success, even if it is small, it must use the press and public education in order to increase public participation. Only by conducting these activities in a concerted way will NGOs assist the community in finding solutions and creating more trust in the efficacy of citizen involvement. ●

*Irina Vikhristiuk is director of Vozrozhdeniye's Ecology Club. Translated by Andrew Reese.*

## Belarusian Health Center Heals Patients And Instills Hope

*by Nadezhda Pavlova*

**C**IVIL SOCIETY IS IN ITS INFANCY in Belarus and there has been little public involvement in the development of environmental policy. Despite this, the **EKA Public Association** in the city of Soligorsk is working to encourage public participation by providing facts about health, the environment and how people can take steps to protect themselves.

Women in Soligorsk created EKA with the goal of taking more responsibility for their health and the health of the community. The large mining industry in the city has created air and water pollution and produced numerous health hazards for the city's inhabitants. Faced with these threats, EKA has worked

to emphasize the important connection between public health and the environment. The organization's members include doctors, biologists, engineers and retired people, who give lectures in the community to inform the public on issues vital to their survival and to encourage citizens to take a more active role in safeguarding their health.

To reach a larger portion of the community, EKA established a health center called *Nadezhda* (Hope). The center shares information about the alarming decline in life-expectancy in the region and the dangers of smoking, drinking and eating fatty foods. The health center staff utilizes holistic methods of treatment and considers all factors affecting human health, including

the psychological factors. The center also informs its patients about the effects of environmental conditions on health and draws attention to real and potential health risks. Over 4,000 patients have visited the health center to consult with the center's health professionals. Patients sometimes become members of EKA, and their involvement reinforces the community dialogue on health-related issues.

Most importantly, EKA attempts to increase public awareness about preventative health care rather than wait for public health emergencies. Part of this process involves ensuring that citizens remain informed. In a current campaign, members have distributed information about the Soligorsk Potassium Salt Plant. Builders of the plant gave little consideration to the potential environmental risks. The underground processing and enrichment of sylvinitic ores harms wildlife habitats, pollutes underground water sources and threatens to salinize the soil, making it unproductive. By educating the public, EKA provides citizens with the opportunity to fight for their rights before ecological damage creates a health crisis.

In disseminating information, it is easier to bring those who have suffered from environmental pollution into the environmental movement. Since victims of pollution are frequently unaware of the source of their health problems, EKA sponsors lectures, discussion groups and seminars to educate people about local issues and the danger of indifference. Along with raising environmental awareness, EKA has also established the women's club, "New Path," which serves as a forum for discussing healthy lifestyles, and a club that promotes the use of alternative energy sources.

To generate more active citizen participation on environmental issues, EKA initiated the "Air We Breathe" project, which utilized local volunteers to assist in biomonitoring in Soligorsk's industrial region. The project aimed to create an effective monitoring system using natural indicators, such as lichens, to assess the environmental conditions. Data was also collected by tracking the incidence of illness among children in the region.

Participants and volunteers, including nine biology teachers and 32 students from local schools, held a plenary meeting to define the objectives of the project. They wanted to know how to help their families stay healthy, the sources of pollution and what they could do about it. The organizers ensured that everyone received a task and set deadlines for data collection.

DJ Peterson

**Irresponsible mining practices threaten the health of miners and residents of mining communities.**

### **Belarusian Organizations Required to Re-register**

On January 26, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree requiring the re-registration of all public organizations, trade unions and political parties between February 1 and July 1. Any organization that fails to obtain proper documentation will be forbidden to operate after the July 15, 1999 deadline.

The burdensome re-registration requirement is clearly an effort to contain and control the development of civic activity in the country. According to the International League of Human Rights, the new legislation is also a violation of Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Belarus is a member.

For more information, contact the International League for Human Rights at <belarus@perfekt.net>.

Once all tasks were completed, EKA members presented their proposals to the mayor of Soligorsk. The city council approved several proposals; creating forest belts to serve as protective zones on the industrial north side of the city; expanding green zones around a school; and regulating automobile exhaust fumes.

Generating more public involvement in Belarusian communities is not the ultimate solution to the complex challenges related to health. Citizens need more information to help them understand the illnesses that affect their families; doctors need improved methods of diagnosis, treatment and

monitoring; and research institutions need more specialists who understand the complexity of the problems. Even though local governments have no money to address these problems, by engaging the public and giving them information, EKA and other community groups are beginning to win respect and empower people to become more involved in protecting their health. ●

*Nadezhda Pavlova is the founder of the Nadezhda health center. Translated by Andrew Reese.*

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## Dnepropetrovsk NGO Combats Heavy Metal Poisoning

The Dnepropetrovsk region of Ukraine is facing a health crisis, with high levels of toxic industrial emissions, widespread poverty and deteriorating medical services resulting in a marked drop in life expectancy. Although economic constraints and weak state structures have made it difficult to find solutions, the Dnepropetrovsk branch of the Ukrainian **Environmental Association Green World**, has risen to the challenge, initiating a series of research programs and public information campaigns aimed at helping local inhabitants lead healthy lives in spite of the environmental contamination that surrounds them.

The Dnepropetrovsk region is home to over 40 percent of the country's iron and steel production, 12.5 percent of its chemical and oil refineries and more than eight percent of its car factories, making it one of country's most contaminated areas. Green World demonstrated that heavy metal poisoning, which can lead to mental retardation and even death, is especially problematic in the region, with levels of lead and cadmium in the blood of local residents four to six times higher than the World Health Organization standard. These levels have a particularly harmful effect on pregnant women, as heavy metals can accumulate in the placenta and poison the fetus. Research conducted by Green World and volunteer staff from the Dnepropetrovsk Medical Academy has shown that pregnant women in Dnepropetrovsk have heavy metal accumulations in both their breast milk and urine.

In thinking about how to address this situation, Green World had to consider the resources available to

both the region's population and the local authorities. As expensive blood treatments and routine heavy metal screening are not economically feasible in Dnepropetrovsk, Green World compiled a list of lifestyle recommendations, including teaching people how to avoid foods with high concentrations of heavy metals. Green World worked to publicize their findings, helping local residents realize the importance of taking steps to protect themselves. Although it is often difficult to raise awareness about environmental health issues within the government bureaucracy, Green World also worked with state institutions to disseminate their research and recommendations.

As a result of Green World's efforts, the levels of heavy metals in Dnepropetrovsk food products and public water supplies are being more effectively tracked, and several additional potential sources of contamination are being monitored. Also, the public now has access to accurate information on the effects of industrial contamination on human health and the measures they can take to protect themselves. Green World's work is helping to ensure that the people of Dnepropetrovsk have the skills and resources they need to lead healthier lives. ●

- Eleonora Belitskaya is a member of Green World and a docent in the Hygiene and Ecology Department of the Dnepropetrovsk Medical Academy. Translated by Paul Lawrence.

**As a result of Green World's efforts, the levels of heavy metals in Dnepropetrovsk food products and public water supplies are being more effectively tracked, and several additional potential sources of contamination are being monitored.**

# Building Environmental Coalitions in Ukraine

by Irina Belashova

**A**S THE GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL movement in Ukraine gains experience, NGOs are beginning to take a broader view of their role in society, expanding their programs to embrace more people and address more complicated issues. Groups are becoming confident in their abilities, and as a result, are increasingly able to cooperate and form coalitions. There have been several attempts to build NGO coalitions in Ukraine, demonstrating that groups are starting to break the patterns of mistrust developed during Soviet times. Through cooperative work, NGOs in Ukraine are strengthening the environmental movement and helping to ensure its survival and sustainability.

## Crafting Strong Coalitions

The success of a coalition, large or small, depends on several factors. Potential coalition members must have a problem or task that can be addressed more effectively through cooperative effort. They must also accurately evaluate their strengths and limitations and have enough knowledge and experience to reach their goals. The parties need a clear idea of both what they must contribute and how they will benefit, such as by improving their image or developing new skills. Finally, productive cooperation requires strong management, and in particular, a clear distribution of responsibility and authority among the parties. Although a concerted effort is needed to make coalitions work, the resulting cooperation allows for more effective NGO activity, promoting resource sharing and fostering the exchange of valuable experience among groups.

NGOs led by Ninevia, a branch of the National EcoCenter of Ukraine, formed an effective short-term coalition to protect the Khortitsa Island in Ukraine's Zaporizhia region from the pollution caused by industry and tourism. As a result of the coalition's work, the Ukrainian government conferred protected status on the island. Another short-term coalition was formed to organize the anti-nuclear walk, "For Mother Earth." Because of the coalition's clear mission and

good management, the event was successful. Ukraine's environmental organizations got together to coordinate the ongoing, biannual conference, "Children Under the Open Sky," which has been an effective vehicle for sharing information and experience.

Although NGOs are often tempted to team up in order to implement larger or more ambitious projects, coalitions built without careful planning often prove unworkable. The availability of foreign funding for cooperative activity, in particular, has led to the premature formation of coalitions. When groups lack vision, knowledge or experience, their coalitions rarely mature into sustainable partnerships because each group concentrates on a narrow task.

In 1991, a group of Ukrainian NGOs attempted to create a broad coalition to work on a range of issues, including biodiversity conservation, environmental policy development and eco-monitoring. The coalition, EcoMission, had a very encouraging start, but was ultimately unsuccessful. EcoMission's main problem was an inability to articulate the need for a coalition involving so many different NGOs working on such a variety of issues. In addition, EcoMission did not clearly identify what each group should contribute and how they would benefit, and lacked a good management structure. EcoMission ultimately proved a demoralizing experience for those involved.

## Ednannia

Hoping to avoid the mistakes of the past, ISAR staff teamed up with several experienced Ukrainian NGOs to form the **Ednannia** coalition in 1997. Ednannia serves as a network of strong NGOs that have joined together to support their less experienced colleagues and help ensure the growth and sustainability of the environmental NGO community. Ednannia has regional and environmental issue coordinators to help facilitate information exchange among groups, organize NGO meetings and seminars and provide comprehensive, personalized

**Through cooperative work, NGOs in Ukraine are strengthening the environmental movement and helping to ensure its survival and sustainability.**

consultations and training sessions to NGOs in search of advice. Since Ednannia's mission is of joint concern to all groups involved and the knowledgeable NGOs that make up Ednannia engage in constant dialogue to reevaluate the coalition's priorities, Ednannia's leaders hope that the network will be a success, giving

environmental NGOs a new and valuable kind of support as they carry out their vital work. ●

*Irina Belashova is director of Programs and Development for ISAR-Kyiv.*

## Moldovan Groups Unite To Protect Natural Treasures

by Ioana Bobeine

**T**HE ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENT OF **Moldova** (EMM) has united environmental activists throughout the country in efforts to preserve Moldova's ecologically sensitive areas. As the

country's most prominent NGO umbrella organization, it focuses on increasing public awareness and strengthening civic initiatives that support nature conservation. EMM has proven the effectiveness of grassroots coalitions by making it possible for isolated organizations

courtesy of Terra Nostra

Clearcutting along a Moldovan river bank.

to join forces with others that share their concerns and by harnessing the media as a tool for disseminating information.

Officially registered in 1990, EMM grew out of an earlier group, the Green Movement of Moldova, which was active through the 1980s. EMM's 17 regional branches support local environmental groups in all 44

regions of Moldova. Thanks to its decentralized structure, its members have considerable autonomy. Overhead costs for EMM's activities are covered by local organizations, donations and volunteer support, while some of its project activities, such as its newspaper, *Natura*, receive support from Western funders. Members from around the country gather at least once a month to share information, although they meet more frequently when a critical threat arises.

EMM has organized virtually all the major environmental events in Moldova, from the conservation of valuable ecosystems to research expeditions along Moldova's rivers. It has assisted in the publication of Moldova's Red Book of endangered species, the founding of an ecological department at the University of Moldova and the protection of Moldovan forests and wetlands. Working together with local journalists, EMM has assured protected status for the Sakharna and Great Stynka nature reserves, and is planning to establish Moldova's first national park.

One of the group's best-known victories was its successful campaign to stop a Moldovan-Swiss joint venture that proposed to carry out logging operations in one of the country's last remaining stretches of forest. Under a 99-year lease, the commercial venture, Seabeco-Silva, would have received tax-free access to approximately 15,000 acres of protected forestland. When EMM learned of the deal, which had been kept secret, it published the story in *Natura* and worked closely with the Association of Environmental Journalism and EcoTourism on a broad scale publicity campaign using radio, television and the print media. The group gathered thousands of signatures on a



petition opposing the joint venture as a theft of Moldova's natural heritage and appealed to the president of Moldova and the speaker of parliament to annul the agreement. Public opposition saved the forest, and the deal was cancelled.

Building cross-sectoral support for environmental protection is a key element in EMM's strategy and the organization works closely with government institutions, other NGOs and the public. For instance, when EMM learned of a plan to construct a cattle breeding complex adjacent to the Tsaul Arboretum, EMM persuaded the government to include EMM representatives on the commission organized to study the environmental impact of the proposed project. At the same time, they published three special supplements in *Natura* outlining the air, water and soil pollution problems in Moldova. They also invited members of parliament, the minister of the environment, environmental NGOs, regional EMM members and local

residents to participate in a roundtable discussion on the project. The discussion highlighted the potential negative consequences of building such a facility adjacent to an important botanical park. As a result, the government rescinded the project.

The goal of EMM members is to challenge those who seek to exploit and destroy Moldova's natural resources for profit. Having achieved considerable national success, EMM decided in 1995 to reach out to foreign colleagues by joining the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Joining forces at the regional, national and international level, EMM has become a strong, effective environmental network that offers local groups the autonomy to judiciously resolve local problems, while ensuring that no group is isolated in its efforts to protect the environment. ●

*Ioana Bobeine is director of EMM's Information and Coordination Center. Translated by Andrew Reese.*

## Pennsylvania Umbrella Organization Strengthens Environmental Movement

by John Warren

*Although rural Pennsylvania is geographically distant from the towns and cities of Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, regional activists face a similar need to attract concerned citizens and dedicated volunteers to the environmental movement. The **Pennsylvania Environmental Network** (PEN) is a coalition of grassroots environmental organizations located throughout the state. A number of PEN groups hosted participants of ISAR's women's leadership program last October. PEN's story illustrates some of the parallels that characterize the methods and experience of grassroots activism in both parts of the world.*

In 1989, citizens in Pennsylvania concerned with waste management in their communities created the Pennsylvania Environmental Network, a statewide organization now linking 36 community groups. Though financial stability and sophisticated communication technologies have helped PEN in its efforts to disseminate information, the fundamental element of PEN's success is a sense of community and shared values about the relationship between human beings and the environment.

PEN itself does not create groups of concerned citizens. When faced with an environmental threat,

groups explode into existence, often with an outcry of "Not in my backyard!"

At the conclusion of an environmental controversy, win or lose, most members of local groups return to their normal lives. But for a few individuals, their involvement proves to be a transforming experience. Their perspective on environmental destruction expands from "not in my backyard," to "not in anyone's backyard." PEN's leadership consists primarily of such individuals, who continue to confront local issues, but also work with PEN on regional problems.

Over the past decade, many of Pennsylvania's "backyards" have been threatened. Waste generally

**When faced with an environmental threat, groups explode into existence, often with an outcry of "Not in my backyard!"**

seeks the path of least resistance, and in the northeastern US, that path leads to Pennsylvania. Many rural communities are politically fragmented and economically depressed, making the state a target of the waste management industry as it searches for cheap sites to construct landfills, hazardous waste incinerators and other treatment facilities. Once a community is targeted for dumping or storing waste, residents look to public officials for help. They often discover that government regulators, directly or indirectly, support the waste industry's plans.

PEN's founding members experienced this, and they learned the hard way how to mobilize community opposition. To support each other, they created a decentralized organization of volunteers that today occupies a special niche in Pennsylvania's environmental community. From the beginning, PEN has supported itself by charging a minimal membership fee of \$5 per month. As a result, PEN's early years were financially lean. By preference and out of necessity, PEN concentrated on activities in which dedicated volunteers substituted for large cash outlays, such as publishing a monthly newsletter and organizing an annual conference on environmental issues.

By emphasizing communication, PEN has generated mutual support among groups in rural communities across the state. In the early 1990s, proposals to construct major hazardous waste facilities were pending in three separate regions of Pennsylvania. In spite of the money and political influence of the large corporations, steadfast local opposition eventually defeated all three projects. These stunning victories sustained PEN's role in the state's environmental community and improved the organization's prospects for obtaining financial support. Foundations interested in encouraging community-based activism realized that PEN could serve as an efficient conduit for assistance money.

Added financial support has allowed PEN to provide local groups with financial assistance for mass mailing announcements or to cover travel expenses for a speaker or visiting specialist. PEN has also initiated a

computer loan program to put powerful communication tools in the hands of local activists.

PEN evolved from using only printers, copiers and fax machines, to a statewide network of volunteers equipped with e-mail and Internet access. This technology enables PEN to supplement its face-to-face meetings with on-line communication. A web site provides resources and links, making it easier for citizens to research controversial issues.

courtesy of PEN



**Over 200 people attended PEN's Environmental Justice Day '98 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.**

Since its founding, most of PEN's member groups have been based in rural communities. Future expansion of PEN's activities to urban and suburban areas presents both an opportunity and a challenge. A coalition of urban, suburban and rural groups has the best chance of exerting a positive influence on the environmental policies of the state government. However, the creation of a broader coalition will carry with it all the challenges of diversity and the need to accommodate a greater variety of local priorities.

Individual environmental fights often seem like impossible battles in the face of corporate opposition, government inattention and public indifference. Yet promoting awareness, utilizing human resources and maintaining cooperative communication have proven to be effective tools. Building and strengthening coalitions will continue to be an essential part of the effort to keep all communities safe. ●

*John Warren has been a member of PEN since 1992 and is a PEN contact person for southwestern Pennsylvania.*

**Building and strengthening coalitions will continue to be an essential part of the effort to keep all communities safe.**

# The Essence of Exchange

by *Miranda Lutyens*

ONCE TRAVERSED BY DIPLOMATS, dancers and token tourists, the travel paths between the US and the FSU are now well worn by all sorts of people. Since the fall of communism, citizen exchange between these two parts of the world has exploded. Each year the US government and private foundations spend millions of dollars on programs that bring together citizens from the US and the FSU to focus on issues ranging from health to law, from education to women's leadership. While the use of the word "exchange" often invites images of back-and-forth, reciprocal travel, the more fundamental meaning of the term relates to a two-way sharing of ideas and opinions between citizens of different cultures. Many programs, however, are designed so that the flow goes in one direction only. People from the FSU come to the US on "study tours" solely to take in information, which is often irrelevant to the situation at home; Americans travel to the FSU to impart expertise through "professional trainings," and leave with nothing new except the hope that their efforts weren't in vain.

Among the programs most likely to produce a back and forth dynamic, in which both sides gain from the experience, are exchanges between grassroots activists. Whether their focus is the environment or minority rights, whether they come from Appalachia or the Crimea, people who are trying to improve conditions in their own communities tend to understand one another, to appreciate receiving information as well as giving it. Engaging in grassroots exchange allows people to see that their own experience is similar to that of people fighting battles on the other side of the world and encourages them to join forces with new colleagues who live far away.

Only when activists have the chance to come together face-to-face and see the reality of one another's activist lives can true exchange be achieved. The daily constraints and lifelong struggles that comprise the reality of grassroots activism in the US get little exposure in post-Soviet society. The prevailing stereotype of life in the US—that Americans are all part of a soap opera existence, defined by luxury and leisure time—eclipses the truth that there are people in America working day and night to save our skies and our streams, to address problems in our schoolyards and on our city streets.

Unfortunately, the view of the US usually offered to FSU visitors rarely includes this part of the American reality. Rather than perpetuate preconceived notions, exchange experiences should reveal a true glimpse of American life. Instead of staying in upscale hotels, with black marble lobbies and spotless white towels, exchange participants from the FSU need to go to the colorful, unpolished places where US activists live and work. The same is true for US exchanges to the FSU, which all too often keep US visitors sealed up in Western-style hotels or strolling tourist-filled streets.

In order to understand community-based activism, visitors must go to the places where the grassroots grow. It is necessary to visit a local group in their "office"—the back room of a women's clothing store or the damp basement of a messy house; to see the source of pollution poisoning a community; or even take part in a community celebration. Stories get shared on contaminated river banks, strategies traded on sagging couches. Sometimes furious note-taking occurs, and sometimes what is said in between sips of hot tea writes itself indelibly into memory. The visiting activist will take home enduring images that include the world surrounding her counterpart and new friend. These snapshots—of a place on the Mississippi or somewhere in Siberia—are stored away, to be pulled out on occasion, perhaps when reassurance is needed that the grassroots can outshine glitz.

Sometimes in destroying one set of inaccuracies, new ones are created. Exchange participants might leave the US with the impression that the script of American life is written and dictated by grassroots activism, believing that every community in every state is packed with people dedicated to the ideas and actions involved in holding government and big business accountable. This pendulum swing from one perception extreme to the other—and all the sweeping generalizations in-between—is typical of any brief, 24-exposure experience. Packed-in activities and interactions offer up impressions that are, at first, fragmented and then patterned together into one big collage that may or may not make holistic sense. Not only are visitors replacing preconceived notions with true-to-life images, but they are also trying to fill up blank spaces with substantiated substance. When they aren't able to get a straightforward response to their enormous, amorphous questions (e.g., "What is the role of

**Only when  
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the nonprofit sector in American society?”), participants look for answers in their limited set of examples. To reconcile the abstract with the generalized details is often an unrealistic goal. But for those who design exchange activities and sit in on sharing sessions, it is essential to find ways to offer participants a sense of how the individual images fit into the bigger picture.

While people tend to concentrate on concrete details, it is important that activists are encouraged to discuss the more abstract issues as well: how the work of a grassroots group fits into the activities of a regional network; what relationship a local effort has to the creation of a national-level coalition. This sort of information provides a wider-angle perspective on what makes a movement grow, where its weaknesses lie, and how relevant and replicable are its patterns. Moreover, understanding the nature of coalitions within one country is especially useful in grassroots exchange, given that cross-border expansion and integration of activist networks represents an effective way of continuing to collaborate on a long-term basis.

### The Next Steps

So how do the next steps in grassroots exchange come about? Once the face-to-face connection has been made, personal relationships developed, issues understood, and information exchanged, how can these experiences and impressions be taken to the next level? While some people consider exchanges to be a one-shot, short-sighted effort—a lump-sum investment with minimal chance for return—there exist numerous examples of international grassroots cooperation that counter this criticism. Offering motivated and engaged individuals from different cultures the opportunity to make initial contact can spark a fire that generates energy, carries enthusiasm and refuses to be put out. Most often these fires spread by virtual means. In an era when international airfares run in the thousands of dollars while e-mail transmissions cost pennies, the Internet can be an efficient and cost-effective mechanism for cultivating international coalitions. And in a world where local activists struggle to protect the integrity of their communities in the face of spreading multinational corporate influence, global grassroots exchange must be made a priority.

Some may question whether continued cooperation at the international level makes sense for grassroots activists, arguing that dollars and days spent focused on another part of the world subtract from the work being done at home. In fact, grassroots exchanges often provide participants with new inspiration to fight their own battles. When participants see the difficulties that

others face, they realize that they are not alone, that their situations are not unique, and that perhaps they have achieved more than they realized. By observing what others are doing and by providing their new colleagues with ideas and encouragement, they lighten the collective burden and gain renewed energy for their own struggles.

The issues and challenges facing grassroots activists in the US and the FSU are so similar, the strategies used by one group so relevant to its overseas counterpart, the problems resulting from one culture's ignorance such an important warning to the other side, that sharing globally is a powerful way of increasing one's effectiveness at home. While it is their similarities that first bring grassroots counterparts together, they soon come to realize that it is their differences that spark the most stimulating insights. As one ten-year veteran of US-FSU grassroots exchange puts it: "On both sides of the partnership equation, fresh, outside perspectives blend powerfully with local knowledge and resources."

The most convincing testaments to cross-cultural grassroots exchange come from the people who have invested themselves in the experience of sharing stories and strategies. Skeptics may question the lasting impacts of a program focused on bringing together individual activists, questioning the likelihood of marked changes in approach or measurable shifts in attitude among exchange participants. But the words of activists on both sides run counter to this claim. As one grassroots exchange participant wrote: "...the most important thing I learned [is] that there are people just like me ... working in other countries for the same causes and with the same obstacles. The exchange program was a reaffirmation that step-by-step we will continue this fight. ... I was feeling quite pessimistic about the chances of making any real change ... having spent the last four years fighting a losing local battle and starting new ones. The program gave me some optimism for the larger picture. I feel more hopeful and inspired than I have in a long time." Words like these speak to the unquantifiable effects that the exchange experience can have on the motivation, outlook and even direction of the individuals involved. No calculation can measure the ripple effect of a few days or even just a few hours spent in the presence of a grassroots sister or brother. ●

*Miranda Lutyens is ISAR's Partnership and Exchange program manager. She organized ISAR's Women's Leadership Exchange Program last fall.*

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## Thank You!

*We would like to extend our gratitude to the following funders for their financial support of our programs during 1998-1999.*

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*Additionally, a heartfelt thanks to the following individuals for their investment in our work and commitment to our mission.*

Sarah Carey  
Sarita Choate  
Harriett Crosby  
Marcia and George deGarmo  
Georgia and William Delano  
Jamie and Andrew Gagarin  
Nancy A. Graham  
David Hunter and Margaret Bowman  
Donna and Arthur Hartman  
June and John Hechinger, Sr.  
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