

PM4SD® Case Study:

Putting the Bulgarian Danube on the Tourism Map

The Bulgarian Danube hosts some of Bulgaria's finest landscape and historic attractions yet to be discovered. Natural charms with wild forests and wetlands, deserted islands inhabited only by birds, riverside marshes and lakes interrupted only by the random villages as well as historical remnants from past times such as Thracian tombs, ancient Roman settlements, medieval Bulgarian and Ottoman castles, Muslim mosques and some of the best preserved painted rock churches make up for the mystic character of the Bulgarian Danube. The following case study showcases how this unique but abandoned region embarked on a journey towards sustainable tourism development and how the Project Management for Sustainable Development certification has helped to overcome obstacles and challenges to arrive at a sound base for participative and benefit-driven tourism development, and to initiate the establishment of a Destination Management Organisation (DMO) for the Danube region.

A look into the past

For a long time the Bulgarian Danube has been neglected in terms of any investment and has been referred to as Bulgaria's least developed region. Overwhelmingly dominated by agriculture this region hosts the newest bridge between Bulgaria and Romania as well as unique population characterized by a wide range of cultures with nomadic traditions and ethnic minorities. Only the eastern part of this area, including the city of Ruse, has been influenced by the more developed Bulgarian Black Sea Coast Economy.

The Turning Point

After a long-lasting absence of the Danube as a destination on the Bulgarian tourism map, two recent developments heralded its rebirth:

- Europe's Macro Regional Strategy for the Danube Basin in 2011 (EUSDR)
- Adoption of a new tourism law in 2013, which demanded for the establishment and integration of tourist regions.

Challenges

At this point neither the administration nor NGOs were equipped with the capacity to properly adopt and launch the measures prescribed in the Macro Regional Strategy or comply with the new legislation, let alone to absorb relevant funds for their implementation or to form organizational structures to manage the newly defined destination –Danube. Public and private stakeholders in the region did not share any kind of information in the past, nor did they network or communicate with each other. A major cause for this was the heavily centralized political and economic structures in Bulgaria, which included the tourism sector. The major challenge was to lead the process, define roles and put into action the strategies and the vision.

Overcoming the challenges, step by step

The public sector - the Bulgarian Ministry of Economy, Energy and Tourism (until 2013, thereafter Bulgarian Ministry of Economy and Energy) took ownership of moderating the required change process and became the co-ordinator for Priority Area 3 of the EU Danube Region Strategy, which focused on “Culture, tourism and people to people contacts”. They sensibly evaluated their capacities and decided to seek technical assistance from the German Government on participatory approaches for tourism development. This pivotal know-how was delivered by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) owned by the German government and included the following working areas:

- Formation of advisory units named Focal Point ‘Destination Danube’ (FPDD), which linked the Ministry in the capital Sofia through a Sofia based-office with the stakeholders in the Danube region via another representative office in Ruse.
- Training of key units in PM4SD
- Mapping key stakeholders and assessing communication gaps between the different public, private and NGO stakeholders
- Linking the EU Danube Region Strategy and policy issues with the end-users and beneficiaries at local level
- Initiating and supporting awareness raising campaigns
- Improving marketing and promotion capacities in the Danube region

As a result of these activities Focal Point ‘Destination Danube’ gradually became recognizable as the incubator for the upcoming establishment of a Destination Management Organisation (DMO) for the Danube region.

Where to find leaders at the local level – yet another challenge

FPDD identified a lack of interest that hindered active participation and contributions from the end-users’ side. A bottom-up approach was needed to raise awareness among the local population in order to change the situation. Additionally, general lack of management capacities both in the public and private sector also meant that it would be difficult to find an actor that could take leadership for such an approach. In order to improve awareness and knowledge among public and private stakeholders about typical DMO roles and tasks and to lay a foundation for building a sense of ownership among the broader Bulgarian society representing the final beneficiaries of these projects i.e. mayors from Danube Municipalities, civil servants and staff from municipal administrations and public-owned institutions, such as Tourist Info Centres, regional and local museums, Nature Parks as well as private sector representatives - to all of them special attention needed to be given.

Overcoming the challenges, step by step

To cover the main knowledge gaps, FPDD started building awareness and implementing Human Capacity Development (HCD) measures among responsible civil servants from municipalities and municipality-owned organizations. Again GIZ contributed with know-how, this time with an innovative multi-stakeholder-module training programme and applying PM4SD that was tailored to the specific requirements of the Bulgarian Danube stakeholder map.

With the support of GIZ, FPDD carried out the following tasks:

- Fostering sustainable destination development;
- Building a tourism network through encouraging dialogue and cooperation between individual stakeholders;
- Supporting product development inter alia linked and border crossing products;
- Supporting marketing of the region, especially to foreign source markets;
- Business Consultancy services from experts;
- Networking events and workshops;
- Capacity building and training.

Output, Outcomes and Benefits

All these activities have facilitated tourism stakeholders in the Bulgarian Danube region to identify and promote mutual interests, goals and needs.

- First examples of joint public-private partnership projects and products are as follows: 1st Volunteer Camp at Nature Park 'Rusenski Lom', Bulgaria's "National Cleaning Day"; the Roman Emperors' and Danube Wine route – soon to be officially certified as European Cultural Route; the 'Blue & Wine Expo' - International Blue Week Festival and the promotional campaign "Ruse - Free Spirit City".
- FPDD has become a respected voice for addressing and promoting tourism-related issues towards regional and local authorities.
- Key decision making stakeholders such as mayors and other public and private authorities benefit from the learning outcomes and increased capacities of their employees, which they can now use to the benefit of their communities through increased tourism income.

Key websites:

<http://pm4esd.eu/>

<http://www.festfoundation.eu/>

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