Environmental Activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Presented by:
Samir Lemeš, Ph.D., Eko forum Zenica
<samir@ekoforumzenica.ba>
Environmental Activism in Bosnia-Herzegovina

• Zenica – 125 years of "Steel City"
• Unanswered letters
• Protests and rallies
• Internationalization
• Media
• Legal Actions
• Cooperation
• What else could we do?
Zenica – 125 years of "Steel City"

- In 1892, Austro-Hungarian entrepreneurs started iron/steel production in Zenica, Central Bosnia.
- After WW2, socialist government decided to expand the production, using Russian technology.
- Until 1990's: 20,000+ employees, producing 3,000,000 tons of iron/steel annually.
- In 1960's first environmental activities
- In 1992 production completely stopped
- In 1999 acquired by Kuwait Investment Agency
Zenica – 125 years of "Steel City"

• In 2004, Lakshmi Mittal acquires 92% of the steelworks from KIA and Bosnian government.
• In 2008, integral steel production restarted: Sintering Plant, Coke Oven, Blast Furnace, Power Plant, BOF, Forging Plant, Rolling Mill.
• Air pollution starts to increase again.
• Privatization agreement was never disclosed.
• In December 2008, local intellectuals and activists self-organize as NGO "Eko-forum".
Zenica – 125 years of "Steel City"

• 30% of pre-war production rate
• 70% of pre-war air pollution
• Government silent and "blind"
• "We need to keep the valuable employment"
Unanswered letters

• Eko forum tried to participate in environmental permitting process.
• The Environmental Protection Act was adopted in 2003: all existing installations must submit a plan of activities to gradually adjust operations to new regulations.
• ArcelorMittal engaged experts from the local university to prepare the plan.
• Authorities spent 2 years to issue the permits.
• All projects should have been finished until 2011.
• Eko forum's suggestions were ignored in permits.
Unanswered letters

• We asked the authorities to publish the air quality data.
• We asked the privatization agreement to be disclosed.
• We asked the company to disclose the emissions data.
• Almost no answers came to our requests for information.
• Those we did receive, were inaccurate, falsified or just lame excuses.
• No immediate measures could have been taken, because we had the air quality data with 2-day delays.
Protests and rallies

- December 2012: "We survived the war, we will survive you as well!"
Protests and rallies

• The first results came right after the protests (very well covered by media).
• We finally received (some of) the information.
• Local authorities installed automatic air monitoring equipment.
• In December 2013, SO₂ exceeded triple hourly average threshold.
• Alarm episode was declared, and measures gave results within hours!
Protests and rallies

• During the alarm episode, citizens were advised to remain indoors.
• We organized an "Indoor Protest" to wake up citizens and other local CSO's.
Protests and rallies

• Our actions gave modest results.
• Penalties for pollution were symbolic.
• The government kept using new excuses.
• *If we push too much, the foreign investor will leave*?! 
• The corporation's revenues are much larger than national GDP, which allows them to blackmail the government.
• We tried to internationalize our problem.
Internationalization

- We contacted international organizations, foreign embassies, foreign media, ...
- Czech NGO "Arnika" helped us to build our capacities, to use the Aarhus convention (international treaty that gives us right to be informed, to participate and to use legal actions).
- We organized meetings, workshops, seminars, conferences; all in order to raise the awareness.
- The UN funded National Environmental Report didn't mention that Zenica has pollution problems.
Internationalization

• We attracted the attention of US Ambassador, ms. Maureen E. Cormack, who visited us prior to visiting both the local government and the company ArcelorMittal Zenica.

• We asked for support in unordinary way: *don't help our organization, provide expertise for the ministry, because they lack capacities to cope with the problem.*

• This really improved our position.
Media

• Whenever journalists ask for information from the authorities, they are typically faced with silence, excuses or long delays.

• Even citizens turn to us instead of authorities.

• We provide accurate, reliable and up-to-date information, and we have built the good relations with local and national media.

• We often attract the attention of international media: Italian, French, Croatian, Serbian, Slovenian, Czech, British, Danish,...
Media

- British BBC made a documentary about our activism in March 2016.
- We had to accompany each sentence, each number, with written documents, upon requests of ArcelorMittal's lawyers.
- In post-production, the Corporation threatened BBC with lawsuit, and they decided not to broadcast the movie.
- A year later, the Guardian dared to publish the story. Mittal's lawsuit followed immediately.
Legal Actions

• When everything else failed to give results, we decided to submit criminal charges against the steelworks and against the government officials.

• 20 months later, the prosecutor's office still investigates the proofs we provided.

• Environmental permits expired after 5 years.

• The ministry issued the new permit, without public hearing, not following the regulations and we had to start the litigation procedure.
Legal Actions

• A Master thesis at the local University "proved" that steelworks contributes only 10-15% in total pollution.

• It turned out later that input data for computer simulation was wrong, but the professors failed to react.

• I started the procedure in front of Ethics Committee, without success.

• When it was published in an interview in national newspaper, corrupted professors sued me for defamation.
Cooperation

• When all environmental permits expired, and one of them was litigated, the ministry decided to issue a new, single permit.

• This time, they decided to allow us to participate, and our experts tried to make the new permit better than the previous.

• More than a year later, after tens of meetings, harsh negotiations, the ministry issued the new permit, with new activities planned to compensate for failed projects from the past.
Cooperation

• US Embassy in Sarajevo organized the meeting of the ministry officials and the most active NGO's, in order to mitigate the cooperation.

• We used the opportunity to initiate the change in the federal regulation, which prevents the monitoring of organic pollutants, such as Benzene.

• We also convinced the members of the federal parliament to organize a thematic session about air pollution.
What else could we do?

• Instead using excuses: "recession", "lower steel demand", "lower steel price", "steelworks polluted for 100 years", "it's not us, it's 30,000 domestic fireplaces", "we do not understand BATs in English", "we fixed the roof on local school", "we pay taxes", the corporation must invest into environmental projects, as it does worldwide.

• And we need to continue our advocating and monitoring.
Struggling for clean air since 2008