

# LEAP

LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION PROGRAM

Improving Environmental Management  
through Citizen Participation



INSTITUTE *for* SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

## CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY ACTION

The Institute for Sustainable Communities' (ISC's) Local Environmental Action Program (LEAP) is a community decisionmaking approach that can be used whenever communities face choices or challenges. Citizen participation is the cornerstone of every ISC Community Action and Local Environmental Action Program.

Broad participation elicits better ideas because more people contribute from diverse backgrounds. It ensures long-term results because the community agrees on what is needed, and how best to meet those needs. It breaks down the obstacles between businesses; governments; nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); and ethnic, racial, and religious groups so that people from all segments of society are working together instead of competing for limited resources. It provides a model for community interaction well beyond environmental issues.

ISC keeps the focus of activity on the local community and the need for local people to make their own decisions. When all sectors of the community agree on what is needed and how to best meet those needs, they can then hold their leaders accountable over the long term. ISC builds local capacity by training trainers, providing targeted grants, establishing partnerships with local governments and NGOs, and creating LEAP models that can be shared and replicated in other communities. ISC promotes low-cost solutions to problems, recognizing that communities cannot succeed if they always have to rely on national or international support to implement their ideas.

ISC currently manages the *Local Environmental Action Program* in seven demonstration communities throughout Ukraine with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

## WHAT IS A LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION PROGRAM?

LEAPs incorporate meaningful public input in local government decisionmaking. They provide a forum for bringing together diverse individuals with different interests, values, and perspectives to guide the community through the planning process. Representatives from local and regional governments, businesses, NGOs, and academia, among others, work together over a 12- to 24-month period—in partnership with the local government—to forge a consensus on recommended priorities and actions for addressing environmental concerns in the community. These recommended priorities and actions are compiled in an *environmental action plan* that serves as a blueprint for future environmental investments. Recommendations from the plan are then incorporated into the decisions of the municipal council and other implementing bodies.

While LEAPs can be adapted to individual community needs, each LEAP includes the following essential components:

### Extensive Public Participation

This includes soliciting opinions from the community; raising public awareness; and actively involving citizens from every corner of the community in meetings, activities, and local actions.

### Stakeholder Involvement

A diverse mix of representatives from different institutions as well as individual community members either lead activities or provide meaningful input to the municipality in developing a LEAP.

### Action Planning and Implementation

The municipality develops an action plan with community members and institutions responsible for implementation. The action plan is adopted by the municipal council and updated regularly. An oversight committee tracks implementation to ensure results are achieved.



## WHY DO A LEAP?

### To Build Consensus among Diverse Community Interests

LEAPs help build communication, partnerships, and common solutions among diverse sectors of the community. Led by a multi-stakeholder group, representative of a broad cross-section of the community, LEAPs emphasize team building and consensus decision-making.

### To Foster Broad Public Support for Environmental Actions

By engaging citizens from the beginning, communities have ownership of difficult decisions and support actions to solve problems. Through openness and transparency, LEAPs lead to action plans that identify the most appropriate solutions for addressing the top environmental problems and build strong public trust for future actions.

### To Target Limited Resources Where They Will Do the Most Good

Every community is facing increasing problems with fewer resources. By assessing and ranking environmental problems based on the human and ecological risks they pose, as well as public viewpoints and the municipality's ability to control or influence a particular problem, LEAPs generate practical, cost-effective actions that communities can handle.

**To Apply National Policy at the Local Level**  
LEAPs provide a framework for helping communities incorporate national policies using practical approaches at the local level.

**To Encourage Sustainable Development**  
LEAPs help communities examine and address major environmental issues that adversely affect both human health and the health of the ecosystem. They emphasize minimizing pollution and waste, efficiently using natural resources, promoting pollution prevention, and assuring sustainable resource use over the long term.

**To Strengthen a Community to Solve Other Problems Together**  
Beyond the environmental and human health benefits that LEAPs bring to a community, the approach to citizen engagement and problem-solving becomes a strong thread in the fabric of the community. The approach can be equally relevant to addressing social and economic challenges.



## LEAP RESULTS

Working in partnership with ISC, communities have achieved significant results as the examples below demonstrate.



### Poland

In the Municipality of Ełk, Poland, a community of 50,000 people identified pollution of Lake Ełk as the most serious issue facing the community—in terms of both its adverse environmental and economic impacts on the community. The community has improved water quality in the lake through a multi-faceted plan of sewage and storm water improvements, mechanical aeration in the lake, economic sanctions against polluters, improved enforcement, and broad-scale public education.

### Bulgaria

Troyan, a community of 40,000 people in north-central Bulgaria, identified insufficient supplies of drinking water as its highest priority. More than 70 percent of the water supply was being lost from leaks in the old underground pipe network. The municipality implemented a low-cost leak detection and repair program that resulted in water savings of 10 percent. When ISC's project ended, the city had become a national model for local environmental action and recognized by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development for demonstrating the principles of Local Agenda 21.

The Bulgarian Minister of Environment requested that ISC collaborate on a model development process for

## LEAP PHASES

A Local Environmental Action Program involves several different phases over a 12- to 24-month timeframe, including:

### Getting Started (3-6 months)

Starting a LEAP involves gaining the support of the local government, forming a project stakeholder group, and developing a *community vision*.

### Assessing Environmental Issues and Setting Priorities (6-12 months)

The community conducts an assessment of current environmental conditions based on available information and a reasonable level of resources. The results are used to establish priorities for action based upon transparent and agreed-upon criteria, and reflecting broad-based public input.

### Developing an Environmental Action Plan (6-12 months)

The plan is the cornerstone of a LEAP and identifies the most appropriate actions as well as indicators for monitoring success and solving the top environmental priorities in the community. The action plan is adopted by the municipal council and serves as a long-term guide for actions in the community.

### Implementing Actions (ongoing)

Achieving tangible environmental improvements is one of the primary goals of a LEAP. Each municipality takes responsibility for seeing that the plan's recommendations are implemented and involves other key institutions to ensure success. This may involve creating and funding an oversight body with a mandate from the municipal council. Effective implementation often requires securing sufficient financing for environmental infrastructure projects.

### Monitoring and Evaluating Results (ongoing)

Monitoring and evaluation by the project stakeholder group provides an opportunity to compare the implementation efforts with original goals and targets, and determine if both the plan is on schedule and sufficient progress is being made toward achieving expected results.

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national solid waste policy utilizing the principles of participatory planning and decisionmaking that were demonstrated in Troyan. ISC focused on all areas of policy development, including solid waste policy options, public participation, and how local and national government agencies can work together more effectively.

#### Macedonia

In Labunista, Macedonia (pop. 2,000) the link between high incidences of dysentery among children and the open sewer system was the obvious priority issue. A small grant from ISC, combined with contributions from citizens through a voluntary tax, allowed the community to install a sewage pipeline to eliminate the direct threat to human health.

#### Russia

The formerly closed City of Nizhnii Tagil, Russia, with a population of more than 400,000, has undertaken three Community Action projects with ISC. The initial project improved air quality and community health by finding low-cost ways to significantly reduce particulate emissions from the mining industry. The community improved solid waste management by reducing open dumping, restructuring city user fees to support new collection efforts, improving air quality by reducing uncontrolled burning of waste, and upgrading ground water monitoring at the landfill. A third community plan resulted in a greenway for the city to conserve open space and increase tourism and business development resulting from the recreation potential of the greenway.

Today, the government of Nizhnii Tagil views its citizens as a resource of information, works in partnership with NGOs to accomplish mutual goals, and invests resources to support citizen initiatives.

## WHO IS ISC?

ISC is an independent, nonprofit organization based in Vermont, USA that helps communities in existing and emerging democracies solve problems while building a better future for themselves and the world. The organization gives communities—and the organizations that support them—the training, technical assistance, and grants they need to solve their own problems and shape their own destiny long after ISC's work with them is finished. ISC was one of the first organizations to develop and implement Community Action and Local Environmental Action programs as a vehicle for fostering citizen participation in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Since 1991, in partnership with host-country organizations, ISC has conducted Community Action projects in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States. When completed, the projects have helped communities implement low-cost solutions to such priority issues as establishing recycling programs and other local solid waste management improvements; creating after-school programs for at-risk teenagers; generating electricity through methane recovery; and improving local economies through ecotourism opportunities.

ISC authored the *Guide to Implementing Local Environmental Action Programs in Eastern and Central Europe*, published by the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe. The guide, based on ISC's hands-on experience, offers step-by-step guidelines and includes numerous case studies from ISC partner communities in the region. It has been translated into Romanian, Macedonian, Ukrainian, and Russian. A training handbook and CD-ROM have also been developed to accompany the guide.

ISC focuses on environmental, economic, and social concerns, and the need to address all three to succeed.

To ensure that its work is successful, ISC involves different groups of people within a community, from the most to the least powerful, to encourage fair and lasting—sustainable—results.

With offices in the United States, Macedonia, Russia, and Ukraine, ISC's work covers five major program areas: community action, civil society, environment, education and youth, and business development. ISC has managed more than 50 international projects in 15 countries with support from individual donors, private and corporate foundations, and the U.S. Government.



## CONTACT ISC

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