

# Sustainable development in Omsk – lessons for Central Europe<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In the paper, two short development projects in Omsk carried out in 2002-3 and 2005 are discussed. The authors provide some background about Omsk, the projects and the project partners, describe what was done in the projects themselves, outline the results of the projects, draw lessons from the experience gained during the project, paying attention to transferability, and make some recommendations about conducting the planning of sustainable development.

**Keywords:** *sustainable development, Omsk, Central Europe, Small Environmental Projects Scheme, capacity building*

## 1. Introduction

This paper tells the story of two short development projects in Omsk, one in 2002-3 and a successor project in 2005, both funded by the UK Government under its Small Environmental Projects Scheme (SEPS). The first project lasted 9 months and was entitled “Building Capacity in the City of Omsk to Undertake and Implement Strategic Planning for Sustainable Development”. The second project, which grew directly out of the first one, also lasted for 9 months and was called “Developing a Strategic Plan for Zero Waste in the City of Omsk”.

The Russian Government’s only formal commitment to sustainable development is found in the President’s Law of 01.04.96, which defined general directions for moving towards sustainable development in Russia. However, in 2002 this concept was completely new to the Omsk partners. The definition of sustainable development used in the projects, whilst never

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expressed explicitly, was based on Brundtland's definition and made use of the well-known Venn diagram, where sustainable development is possible if and only if the economic, social and environmental aspects of problems are considered jointly and solved together. This is of course completely compatible with the EU 2001 "Strategy for Sustainable Development" (Commission of the European Communities, 2001) and with the proposed Guiding Principles for 2005-10 (Commission of the European Communities, 2005). Hence, it is appropriate to consider how far the lessons from the Omsk projects are transferable.

In this paper we:

- provide some background about Omsk, the projects and the project partners
- describe what was done in the projects themselves
- outline the results of the projects
- draw lessons from the experience gained during the project, paying attention to transferability
- make some recommendations about conducting the planning of sustainable development.

## **2. Background**

Omsk is a large, old industrial city with more than 1 million inhabitants. It was founded by Peter the Great at the confluence of the Irtysh (the biggest tributary of the Ob) and a smaller river called the Om. Dostoevsky was imprisoned there in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Admiral Kolchak, the leader of the Whites, had his headquarters there in 1918-19. There is a splendid theatre built in 1905, (where Putin recently watched Michael Frayn's Noises Off.) Omsk is a city with manifest civic pride.

Strategic planning in Omsk dates from the middle of the 1990s. There was an attempt then to create a plan for the strategic development of Omsk. The first concept was worked out and discussed at a city conference in 1998. In 2002 a new variant of this concept for the strategic plan was developed, which included analysis of all the spheres of the city's activities and suggestions about its development priorities, but which did not include any practical mechanisms for involving the city in the process of strategic planning. The work on the SEPS project draws

on the analytical advantages of previous concepts and attempts to suggest a method for step-by-step implementation of the process of sustainable development.

However, there is one very important institution in Omsk, which as far as we know is unique in Russia. This is the system of territorial self-help committees (SHCs). These started in 1992 from a request in one area to set up such a (locally-elected) committee. Now there are 76 such committees, each one having been set up by local demand. In each case, the first step is to hold a citizens' meeting, where the chair is elected. There is always a candidate suggested by the municipality, but also others proposed by local citizens, including the possibility of self-nomination. Locally proposed candidates often win. The chairs, usually women, hold office for 4 years, subject to their constituents' approval. Each committee is responsible for raising the quality of life in its area. The municipality does not tell the committees what to do. There is a legal document which defines their functions. Each of the 5 administrative districts has a fund for its territorial self-help committees, administered by a chair elected from and by the chairs of the constituent committees, who is supported by another of the chairs in the role of secretary. The municipal budget provides funds, including funds for administrative support. As well as the 76 self-help committees, there are about 70 house committees (with about 3000 block leaders) and about 500 committees for small estates of wooden houses – 40% of the housing in the city is in such areas. Links between these various committees and the local self-help committee are not always clear.

The first project, SEPS 83, had its origins in a short study visit in 2001 within the framework of a Tempus Tacis project. Judith Marquand had taken a small group to see environmental policies at work in Yorkshire and Teesside in the UK. Sergey Kostarev was a member of this group. At the end of the visit he asked whether it would be possible to develop a project with him in Omsk. The SEPS programme provided a suitable vehicle. The British Council administered the SEPS programme. Negotiations with them seemed interminable, but at last a 9-month contract was agreed, starting in June 2002.

We set up a steering committee in Omsk, chaired by Sergey Kostarev, by then Chairman of the Omsk Ecological Committee, and including 3 of the Mayor's special advisers, a senior member of the Finance Department in the city administration and the previous Chairman of the Ecological Committee, who is a social scientist. The UK participants were Judith Marquand as project leader and Ralph Cobham, a very experienced consultant in sustainable development,

who was already working with Scott Wilson Kirkpatrick on a big project in Tomsk. The total UK input was (in theory!) only 34 days. The overall objective of the project was “to build capacity in Omsk to develop and implement strategic plans for sustainable development and to disseminate information to other parts of the Siberian region about how this can be done”.

The second project arose directly from the recommendations of the first one. This time, the Omsk partners, led again by Sergey Kostarev, included as a main partner an environmental NGO, “The Ecological Centre for Children and Youth”, which developed and implemented an impressive educational and informational programme. The Mayor’s Environmental Adviser, who had been involved in the earlier project, was central to this one. From the UK, Judith Marquand was joined by Adam Symons, then Head of Waste Management at Oxfordshire County Council. The total UK input was larger - 61 days. The overall objective of the project was to develop a strategic plan for waste management in Omsk.

### **3. The Strategic Planning project – Methods**

The first project began with a 2-week visit to the UK by 5 members of the Omsk Steering Committee and an interpreter. Based in Oxford, they heard about the planning procedures of 3 local authorities regarding sustainable development, their work with small and medium enterprises, their waste management systems, and visited several NGOs dealing with community affairs.

Back in Omsk, they began work on their own strategy for sustainable development. The structure adopted for the published plan started with an analytical report on the economic, social and environmental condition of Omsk (SEPS-83 Project, 2003a). It then went on to develop an Action Plan (SEPS-83 Project, 2003b), focusing in particular on three selected priority areas.

What is important is not so much what the plan contained, but the process by which it was produced. Omsk was no stranger to traditional Soviet-style top-down planning. Indeed, the *Concept of the Development of the City of Omsk*, which was being produced at the same time as our project, was still top-down and full of theoretical projections. By contrast, our plan was rooted in the situation on the ground, the resources which were currently available and the funds

it was feasible to mobilise over the next few years. At the outset of our project we explained our methods to the mayor. He was highly supportive and interested to see what would emerge.

The way in which we rooted the plan in the expressed needs of the people in the city was, in terms of the political realities present in Omsk, the most innovative dimension of all. We developed the plan with the help of a group of about 20 stakeholders representing all the major interest groups in the City. This stakeholder group included representatives from large and small firms, representatives of a range of environmental and training NGOs, the media, consumers, the SHCs, the City administration and the federal Ministry of Natural Resources. Some members of this group knew each other well. But others had never met before and they had certainly never been consulted in this way about priorities for action, let alone for action to promote sustainable development within the city.

After discussing the concept of sustainable development with them, they carried out a SWOT analysis (an analysis of strengths and weaknesses) for the situation in Omsk. It took account of about 20 different factors and defined the strengths and weaknesses of the city over a wide range of social, economic and environmental spheres. From the results of the SWOT analysis, the stakeholder group selected 3 priority areas for action. As a result of the discussion on sustainable development, they agreed that one of these priority areas should be primarily economic, one primarily social and one primarily environmental. The areas selected as priorities were:

- the development of the capacity of the self-help committees
- the development of small and medium enterprises
- the improvement of the waste management system.

Much more detailed implementation plans were then produced by the steering committee for each of these priorities and agreed with the stakeholder group at a subsequent meeting. The plans outlined what should be done, by whom and when. Indicators of progress started to be developed (SEPS-83 Project, 2003b).

#### **4. The Strategic Planning project - Results**

The Mayor was extremely enthusiastic about the project. One of the members of the steering committee reported that he mentioned sustainable development no fewer than 7 times in a speech he made just after receiving our report!

When Judith Marquand interviewed the steering committee about the project in November 2005, 30 months after the end of the project, it was clear that it had made a significant impact, particularly because of the effect it had made on the steering committee members themselves and the work that they had done subsequently. For example, the member who was chairman of the mayor's self-help committee group had worked with them on a concept of their own and conducted several seminars with SHC leaders. He had used the methods of the project successfully in planning sustainable development in one of the smaller cities in the north of the Omsk Region. The mayor's adviser on environmental affairs reported that private businesses had started to be brought into waste collection and confirmed that SHCs had developed in competence. He often made use of examples from the study visit. A member of the financial administration had changed her whole approach to decision-making. She and others had tried to apply this in developing the mayor's strategy – they now talked to and worked with SHCs. Another of the mayor's advisers had been particularly impressed by the concept of indicators, as well as by the merits of bottom-up approaches. Sergey Kostarev listed a wide range of benefits, relating mostly to methods of working in a group and with methods of consulting a wider public.

When the group was asked about the effects of the project not on themselves, but on the city, it emerged that attempts to work on strategic development had continued to take place, but they had been hindered by the poor relationship between municipal and regional authorities, until the new mayoral elections in 2005. Afterwards, a City Strategic Development Board was established. It elaborated more than 50 programmes for different branches. This is probably too many! But the process for deciding the programmes had been improved. Citizens were brought into a wide public discussion. Only after such discussion were programmes included in the city development plan for the period 2006-2010.

One of the team summarised the position: "We cannot talk for the whole city, but for example with respect to self-help committees, they have started doing things differently. Also business and housing have changed. The cleaning of the city is the first area into which business

has come. In housing, they are about to introduce contractors subject to a central law. There is now a new approach. Fewer concepts and more implementation and action plans.” Also, all the mayor’s programmes are now monitored and evaluated.

## **5. Waste management project – methods**

In 2005, we were able to take one of the main recommendations of the SEPS 83 project forward directly into a further SEPS project. The new project started in March 2005 and ran until the end of November. The primary role of the new partner, the “Ecological Centre for Children and Youth”, was to produce an intensive information and education campaign in the 3 SHC districts which the Omsk team, in conjunction with the administration, had selected to participate in the project. An Environmental Information Service manned by 15 volunteers was set up. There were 10 theatrical productions about waste, mainly for children, with extensive audience participation. Workbooks were produced for schools, together with a range of competitions for school children. There were posters about the pilot activities and competitions.

However, the central work of developing a strategy and an advisory team within the administration to implement it was badly delayed by the mayoral elections at the end of April. The previous mayor was not a candidate. We had to wait until the new mayor and his new team were in place – in effect, till late May – before we could seek direct support and participation from the administration. Fortunately, the previous mayor’s environmental adviser, Rinat Valitov, remained in a pivotal position, where he was able to take the work of the project forward.

But the timing of the administrative changes meant that it was not feasible – if, indeed, it ever had been – to train a strategy support group within the administration within the tightly time-constrained project. Instead, we trained 2 members of the Ecological Centre for Children and Youth to undertake the support work for the pilot recycling exercises which went forward in the 3 SHC areas.

The main project had 2 closely-related prongs. The first was to develop, through consultation with a stakeholder group, the skeleton of an overall strategy for waste management within the city. The second was “to develop the capacity to implement a selection of community-wide waste collection and recycling schemes”. This implied developing the capacity to

experiment, to draw conclusions from the experiment and to build on the evaluation of the experiment to implement a scheme for the household separation of waste, as an input to the overall strategy. In order to do this, we worked with the 3 SHCs, the parts of the administration concerned with waste collection and disposal, the waste collection contractors, and the only significant recycling firm in the city.

Given the shortage of time and the uncertainties within the administration, we had to start immediately with the pilots, working seriously on the rest of the strategy only when the shape and interests of the new administration became clear. In discussion with the 3 self-help committees, it became clear that their priorities were to do something about the collection of segregated plastic bottles, paper and cardboard. So we put in place a carefully designed experiment with two special bins, one for plastic bottles and one for paper and cardboard, at 15 sites within the 3 areas.

The pilot collection took place from the beginning of June until the end of August. In 2 of the SHC areas, none of the housing blocks had refuse chutes. However, in the third, at one of the sites the blocks did not have refuse chutes and at one they did have refuse chutes. Half of the bins for paper had flaps and half did not. The condition of (all) the bins and the sites was monitored each day for a week just before the pilot started and for one week each month during the course of the pilot.

At the start, until about the end of June, the bins were used properly. Later, the waste in them became more contaminated. The holes for plastic bottles had been found convenient for disposing of plastic bags! The paper bins with small lids over the slots did not contain much paper; the paper bins with open slots worked better. There were problems with collection. On some occasions the collection vehicle had broken down and failed to collect the waste, which had led to overflowing bins. There was then little incentive to segregate.

The conclusion which the self-help committees drew from this experience was that there was a need for further education of the public. They pointed to a need for information about the pilot schemes to be distributed to every household, not just each block. However, even if only a few people do not co-operate, then the bins become contaminated. Extra education and information, while desirable, is not likely to lead to a sufficient response. Discussion between the self-help committees, the administration, the recycling firm Omskvytorsyriei and the waste collection and disposal firm Clean City suggested that a better way forward would be to provide



supervised sites at selected points in the SHCs, where the condition of the segregated waste could be monitored. This suggestion is being taken further.

At the outset, the administration, in particular, expressed scepticism about the readiness of the public to take part in any scheme which required their co-operation in the segregation of waste. The usual claim was made, that the Russian mentality is such that no one would co-operate actively in anything. Also, it was alleged that apartments were too small to allow segregated waste to be stored. If the contaminated bins had been the only evidence of unwillingness to participate, such doubters might have been vindicated.

Fortunately, it was not the only evidence we collected. Demonstration of the readiness of many citizens to take part in schemes to segregate waste was provided by 2 questionnaires. 500 copies of the first questionnaire were distributed by house leaders at the outset of the pilot scheme. 500 copies of the second questionnaire were distributed by house leaders at the end of the pilot scheme. The methods of distribution, despite detailed instructions, are certainly not above question. Nonetheless, the results are unequivocal. The first questionnaire distinguished between different types of houses and asked how far people thought they would be prepared to segregate plastic bottles, paper and cardboard. People were also asked what other wastes, if any, they would like to segregate.

The second questionnaire, at the end of the pilot scheme, asked whether (and how often) households had in fact segregated plastic bottles, paper and cardboard during the pilot scheme. It also asked whether households would be prepared to separate glass bottles, metals and food waste – the 3 suggestions made most frequently in response to the first questionnaire. In brief:

- on average, about as many households segregated plastic bottles at least once a week (54%) as said before the start of the project that they would (57%);
- on average, about as many households segregated paper and cardboard at least once a week (40%) as said before the start of the project that they would (44%);
- 56% of households said they would segregate glass bottles;
- 47% of households said they would segregate metals;
- 46% of households said they would segregate food waste.

There was wide variation between self-help committee areas. Households in one area were much more active in segregation than in the other two. But all in all, the results suggest that people do actually segregate waste when they say they are willing to do so and that a significant proportion

of households are willing to segregate not just the types of waste covered in the pilot scheme, but other types of waste too. The “Russian mentality” is not the insuperable obstacle it was alleged to be.

We discussed the results of the pilot schemes in November with the SHCs, administration, waste collection firm and recycling firm. It was agreed that there were several problems with the system that was piloted, but that there did appear to be a feasible way forward by providing supervised sites at each SHC for collecting segregated waste. So Omsk is moving forward with plans based on the lessons learnt from the pilot exercise.

Suggestions for the strategy were discussed with stakeholders in September. Background material regarding the strategy and a list of 14 issues which the strategy should cover were presented to an audience of 114 at the final conference in November. Conference members selected four of these issues: recycling, re-use, education and the legal framework, as the top priority areas for the strategy to cover. Aspects of the legal framework are of course pre-requisites for other changes to take place – in Russia, there still remains a veritable forest of out-dated regulations which provide a ready means of obstructing any would-be reformer.

Moreover, the new mayor has made waste management one of his top priorities. The strategic plan for waste management, which began to be created during SEPS 366, is included as the basis for this programme. The plan includes budget funds for waste management of over 250 million roubles for the period from 2006-10. The costs of implementing recommendations from the project can be included in this.

In addition, 3 newsletters for the project have been produced. There is a website, [www.ecomsk.ru/project/seps/index.htm](http://www.ecomsk.ru/project/seps/index.htm), both in Russian and (partly) in English. More workbooks, teachers’ handbooks and copies of the outline strategy have been printed for future use. The final conference in November disseminated information about the project to other SHCs in Omsk, representatives from other parts of the region and to activists from Novosibirsk and Tomsk. In the first instance, the Omsk partners intend to work with other SHCs and with villages elsewhere in the Omsk Region.

## **6. Waste management project – results**

To summarise the results from the waste management project:

- it looks as though a viable way forward for recycling has been found;
- within the general strategy, priorities have been selected for immediate work: reform of the legal framework (placed 4<sup>th</sup>) is actually a pre-requisite for the others;
- there are budget funds for waste management in the municipal budget, which are able to accommodate the recommendations from the project;
- plans have been made to start to disseminate what has been learnt about how to develop a strategy of waste management, including segregation of some types of waste, in other parts of the city and the region.

All in all, people in Omsk have developed the capacity to plan for this aspect of sustainable development and to carry out their plans.

## **7. Lessons from the Omsk projects and thoughts about their transferability**

The two sustainable development projects in Omsk were undoubtedly successful. What were the factors which contributed to their success? How far do these factors yield lessons which are transferable?

Firstly, the steering committee for each project was made up of individuals of high competence and great commitment, who welded themselves quickly into a high-performing team. It is impossible to place too much emphasis upon this. At the final conference of the first project there was a presentation about sustainable development given by a team from elsewhere in Siberia, who had been working on their project for 3 years. The Omsk group, who had been working on such a project for only a quarter of that time, had already made far more progress and understood what they were trying to do, and why, with much greater clarity.

Secondly, the team had already understood what good practice was like before they started work. The study visit to selected areas in the UK at the beginning of the first project was

seminal. Moreover, the contribution of consultants with directly relevant expertise – Ralph Cobham in the first project, and Adam Symons in the second – was irreplaceable.

Thirdly, there was genuine consultation with stakeholders in each project from the very beginning. The directions chosen for detailed work and the precise details of the pilot schemes on the ground were all bottom-up decisions. The team suggested a framework, but it was the stakeholders who approved it and who proposed the way forward.

Fourthly, this consultation with stakeholders was greatly helped by the existence of self-help committees. There were already genuine, elected community representatives with whom it was possible to discuss. They knew their constituencies well, both in personal and in physical terms.

Fifthly, the projects were understood by and supported by the local administration from their outset. This has enabled the waste management plans to be incorporated into the local plans and the City budget. If, as we hope, we succeed in obtaining a further project, focussed explicitly on the self-help committees, this will undoubtedly be true of that as well.

In more general terms, the ideas expressed in the city's concept of strategic planning provided the context within which priority issues were set. The SEPS projects promoted the process of strategic planning, showing how to achieve particular solutions to particular problems.

Finally, the projects, especially the waste management project, were supported by extensive education and information programmes.

How far are these success factors relevant to the planning of sustainable development in Central Europe?

Central Europe, like Russia (and indeed like many parts of Western Europe, much more than countries such as the UK like to admit) has a long tradition of top-down bureaucracy, which pervades institutional relationships in a myriad of ways. Its erosion takes patient, detailed work on a multitude of fronts. Old traditions die hard. It is necessary to work with these traditions rather than against them, wherever possible. Persuasion and experimentation are better methods than administrative regulation. But it is necessary to make sure at all levels that local and national customs, laws and administrative regulations do not unreasonably obstruct the adoption of policies for sustainable development.

The biggest single difference between Central European countries and Russian cities is of course membership of the European Union. Central European countries have to meet the

European Union requirements regarding strategies for sustainable development. This makes it imperative that such strategies are adopted, but it does not guarantee that the strategies adopted will be good ones.

This is where the lessons from Omsk become relevant – making sure that administrations employ or work with high quality teams, that they learn about good practice elsewhere, that stakeholders are truly involved from the start, leading to bottom-up rather than top-down selection of priorities and endorsement of indicators. It is not always easy for official bodies to become open to experiment and indeed to develop the capacity to learn constructively from experiment. It is not always easy for them to accept the value of local variations – that variety in “local ecologies” is a source of richness to be preserved, rather than an embarrassment to be hidden or ignored.

People in Central Europe, like people in Western Europe and, indeed, people in Omsk, want to build better lives for themselves, their families and their communities. The challenge is to find effective, sustainable ways of enabling them to do this, amidst institutions designed to a large degree with other ends in view.

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*Zrównoważony rozwój w Omsku – lekcja dla Europy Środkowej*

*Streszczenie*

W niniejszym artykule omówiono dwa projekty rozwojowe, które przeprowadzono w Omsku w latach 2002-2003 oraz 2005. Autorzy przedstawili podstawowe informacje dotyczące Omska, a także projektów i ich partnerów, opisali przebieg projektów oraz główne rezultaty. Następnie omówiono wnioski i wytyczne wynikające z doświadczenia zyskanego dzięki projektom, główną uwagę poświęcając możliwości przeniesienia dobrych praktyk. Poczyniono również pewne rekomendacje odnośnie planowania zrównoważonego rozwoju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zrównoważony rozwój, Omsk, Europa Środkowa, Schemat Małych Projektów Środowiskowych, budowanie potencjału