Involvement of the local population

Observing the shortcomings of the successive post-accident strategies implemented during the ten years following the Chernobyl accident, the ETHOS project was proposed as an innovative strategy for post-accident rehabilitation in order to better cope with the main features of the post-accident situation, notably with the long term social and economic dimensions.

A main goal was to create conditions for the inhabitants of the contaminated territories to enable them to become more autonomous actors in a rehabilitation process embracing the improvement of the local living conditions as well as increasing radiological safety.

The recovery of self confidence and control among the population as well as the restoration of social trust were also key objectives in the ETHOS approach as they were considered as a necessary component in the rebuilding of security.

Implementation

The project was implemented in the village of Olmany (1300 inhabitants) situated in the District of Stolyn, close to the Ukrainian border and located about 200 kilometres from Chernobyl as the crow flies. According to Belarussian law, Olmany is located in a so-called “voluntary relocation zone” meaning that the inhabitants of the village can ask for relocation with the financial support of the State if they wish. The average $^{137}\text{Cs}$ ground contamination is between 185 and 555 KBq/m$^2$; this corresponds to annual individual doses ranging between 1 and 5 millisieverts per year.

An agreement was signed at the beginning of the Project defining the cooperation rules between the ETHOS team, the Chernobyl Ministry of Belarus, the District of Stolyn and the authorities of the village of Olmany.

Concretely, the Project consisted in the setting up and accompaniment of six working groups involving altogether about 100 inhabitants as diverse as teenagers, young mothers, farmers, teachers or foresters. Each working group dealt with a specific aspect of private or social life in the village: the radiological protection of children, the management of the radiological quality of milk production, the management of the radiological quality of meat production, the education of children living in a contaminated environment, the management of contaminated wastes and finally the shooting of a video film by the youth of the village.
Achievements

Significant improvements in living conditions, particularly concerning the quality of private agricultural production and the radiological protection of children, have been achieved thanks to the active involvement of the inhabitants of the village. The actions developed in the project have allowed mothers to take care directly of the protection of their children and the teachers of the school to develop and diffuse a practical radiation protection culture in connection with the daily activities in the village.

The inhabitants of Olmany have gained a more precise and reliable picture of the radiological situation within and around the village. The production of milk containing less than 111 Bq/l (contamination limit for marketing) has increased from 25 to 55% in winter and from less than 10 to about 80% in summer. The economic links with the district and the uncontaminated zones have been restored for milk and meat. The average internal contamination of children has been reduced and many villagers have recovered their self-confidence and motivation.

Further developments

As the project has demonstrated the feasibility to actively involve the general population in the rehabilitation process on the scale of a village, the local and national authorities have expressed the wish to study the conditions for a transfer of know-how and an extension of the approach to the local administration in the contaminated territories. During the year 1999, a new project supported by EC-DG Environment and a number of other European organisations was designed to implement the ETHOS approach in five villages of the Stolyn district (90000 inhabitants), in cooperation with the local and national authorities and also with Belarussian scientific institutions. The approach is implemented by 80 local professionals (nurses, medical doctors, teachers, managerial staffs from collective farms,...) who voluntarily participate to the project with the support of the ETHOS team and the local authorities.