

Plenary Presentation

3.7 FIGHT FOR ASBESTOS FREE COUNTRY – THE SLOVENIA CASE

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Introduction

An alpine country in the heart of Europe, Slovenia has 2 million inhabitants that live on 20 000 square kilometres. On the west it borders with Italy, on the east with Hungary and Croatia, and on the north with Austria. The national gross product is cca 10 000\$.

For a long time the only known plant in Slovenia to use asbestos was Salanit Anhovo, a cement-asbestos company situated on the north-western border with Italy. The plant, laying in the alpine valley, was one of the most successful and well known producers in the former Yugoslavia. It has been working since 1921 and residents of the surrounding villages can't remember ever living without it. They don't remember a time when they worried about unemployment, because factory has always been there.

Anhovo and its residents could notice the pollution easily: piles of concrete, dust, noise, distasteful fruit and vegetables were a part of their everyday life. The first information found in factory's archives about the danger of asbestos dates from late 50s, but even though people knew asbestos was dangerous, they weren't properly informed or aware of the danger.

The Formation of the NGO and the Association of Asbestos Victims

When in 1979, one of the residents of Anhovo filed a complaint to the factory because of the excessive pollution to his house caused by the vicinity of the cement-asbestos factory and was paid off for caused damage, other residents and workers realized that they too could rebel and demand better living conditions. They could ask the factory to take action or go directly to court. Under the socialistic regime the workers were managing the plant and consequently had their say in management's decisions. Thus, formally, they could easily demand cleaner air and environment.

Following the initiative of three residents in 1982, Anhovo decided to establish its environmental protection movement - the Terrain Committee, which included Anhovo's residents but also the workers from the plant. The action was started by a young Salonit Anhovo employee, Mr. Bavdaz, who worked at the most polluted job posts. Dealing with the management, he soon realised that nobody would listen to him, as he was not enough schooled and had no power. So, upon finding numerous articles about asbestos danger in the factory library (which was very well equipped with international journals like British Journal of Industrial medicine, la Medicina del lavoro), he turned for help to two women residents of Anhovo, a prominent lawyer and an elementary school principal. The three of them first met in Bavdaz's dining room and decided to form the Terrain committee within the Socialist Association since it was impossible in that period to exist or act as an independent non-governmental movement. Mr. Bavdaz was named president and his name alone brought many people to join the organization. But he insisted to rely on the help of his lawyer for the drafting of all formal letters. Soon the established NGO grew. The whole village was there to support its activities and goals, even the local catholic priest. The first main tasks of the Committee were to make the plant enable the people to leave Anhovo and help them build new houses outside the polluted area, to force the management to install all filters and use them. They asked Salonit to adopt all measures necessary to reduce pollution and try to remove its consequences.

But The Committee did more than just demand. Since it was formed mostly of workers, they were able to keep precise notes of when the filters had been on and off, when they had been faulty. A physicist, who was a member of the committee, had calculated the quantity of the dust released each time when the filters were inoperative. In this way, they put more pressure on the company's managers. They knew what was in fact being done for the welfare of the residents and workers.

After countless requests made to the enterprise to let them see the 1979 pollution measurements, the Terrain Committee finally received them in the beginning of April, 1984. The report was devastating - it clearly showed that air pollution with respirable dust was 15 percent (in some cases even 50 percent) over the allowed maximum. Upon seeing this report Committee's members decided to act at once. In only twelve days they held a meeting with company's management and the Inspection Institute for Environmental Protection. Together they came to the conclusion that the

company had to form a clean-up plan of the environment, set due dates for each phase, and also inform Terrain Committee of its progress. In one week, the plan on transfer of residents and a clean-up project were made. The transfer began to take place shortly after. The costs of the transfer were paid by the plant.

The following month, new tasks were set for the company: purchase of a new cleaning device for the road that lead through Anhovo, the purchase of new filters, roof gutters had to be cleaned, damage caused by pollution evaluated.

Throughout this The Committee made sure that the tasks were being carried out. They threatened the company to take legal action if it did not comply with its terms.

When it could not succeed at local level, the Terrain Committee turned to larger community organs and even state institutions. Some didn't want to listen to their problems. Therefore residents turned to the outside world, but received no help from journalists on its way. On the contrary, journalists were not favorable to the movement, not interested in the problems Anhovo had, and unwilling to write disapprovingly about the plant that brought so much money to the state. The cause of this might be the socialistic era, when unfavorable reporting about industry and state was unwelcome and journalists were placed in uncomfortable situations.

Only in the years after the declared independence and following the year 1990 when a lot of asbestos diseases were recognized, the media's interest for Anhovo's problems increased.

By most of the people, institutions and media, the Committee was considered to be a movement that wanted to rebel against the standing order. But in the end it got its place in the community. This was surely the result of the activities of Committee's members, their efforts, and determination to achieve the goals.

It is interesting that many researchers found a perfect place for research in Anhovo: the Salanit Anhovo company hosted and sponsored the most well-known Slovenian and foreign researchers, for example Mr. Valic from Croatia, an influential asbestos expert from WHO. It seems that all of the researchers had been biased or concentrated to help the company with the results. Namely, they never found anything, not even a case of asbestosis or mesothelioma, until in mid 80s when 7 cases of mesotheliomas were discovered. On the other hand, the company had its own physician, who has, after the discovery of too many illnesses, become one of the most

unpopular, if not even despised people in the valley. Even the management of the plant is more popular.

Due to increasingly high number of illnesses the Association of Asbestos victims was established. It made sure, together with the Terrain Committee, that material rights of the ill were properly respected. Both organizations worked hard and finally, on September 27, 1996, they crucially contributed to the passing of the law on the ban of asbestos production and transport of asbestos products in Slovenia.

The Law on the Ban of Asbestos Production and Transport of Asbestos Products in Slovenia

Law states, that the state would assign to Salanit Anhovo holding group about 12 million German marks for the restructuring of the asbestos production in the form of government equity capital. Restructuring was absolutely necessary because of the increased frequency of new asbestos-related diseases, great public pressure and a decline in demand for asbestos-cement products.

Moreover, the Asbestos Law gives employees, who worked directly with asbestos and cannot be re-employed inside the holding and municipality, where they are living, a right to a full pension under one of the following conditions:

- that until the December 12, 1999, they have reached the age of 45 for woman and 50 for man, have had at least 25 years of working experience for woman and 28 for man, of which 10 was in the asbestos production;
- that until the December 12, 1999, they have reached the age of 48 for woman and 53 for man, have had at least 30 years of working experience for woman and 35 for man, of which 20 in the factory where asbestos was used, or
- that they got the disease due to asbestos and work in the asbestos production, where they worked for at least 20 years for woman and 23 for man.

Furthermore, the law states that, the State takes subsidiary responsibility for the claims of employees who fell ill due to asbestos.

Apart from this, it also prohibits the production of the asbestos-cement products in Slovenia and requires the producers to remove asbestos from all working places, it prohibits the circulation of asbestos-cement products on the territory of Slovenia and ensures the establishment of the medical committee to determine the asbestos disease and criteria for the verification.

In the end, the Salonit Anhovo plant has promised to donate 8,3 million dollars in the following years for the clean up of the area.

Slovenian parliament asked Ministry of Health to invite different institutions for application of the project called National directives for Slovenia.

The aims and objectives of the project were to compare the legislation from EU, some western countries, and US with Slovenian, to collect the information about asbestos production in Slovenia for the last 35 years (the number of companies that used asbestos, the quantity of asbestos used in the state, the quantity of asbestos products made and used in Slovenia), to propose the asbestos replacement for certain productions, to make the strategy for handling asbestos waste material, and to prepare the instructions for exposed workers.

The results of the study showed that the asbestos problem lies not only in this valley, but also in at least three other parts of Slovenia. However, it is only in Anhovo, that the people's voice was heard the most.