

Dialogue for a Sustainable Railway Deutsche Bahn AG meets NGOs

Dipl. Ing. Jens Clausen, IÖW (Ecological Economics Research Institute), Hausmannstr. 9-10,
30159 Hannover, Tel.: +49/511/1640344, Fax.: +49/511/1640391 E-Mail:
mailbox@ioew.h.eunet.de

Dipl.-Ing. Wulf-Holger Arndt, IÖW, Giesebrechtstr. 13, 10629 Berlin, Tel.: +49/30/88459427
E-Mail: wulf-holger.arndt@ioew.b.eunet.de

Traffic and traffic industry are subject to intensive observation and criticism on the part of many environmental and traffic NGOs. Chances to take advantage from such criticism differ widely among the various common carriers. For the German Railway Company (DB AG), support from the NGOs is particularly important. Nevertheless, the company is once and again subject to their criticism. So the question arises, whether there is any opportunity for DB AG to find out at an early stage of its activities and projects which of them might be criticized later on. What kind of information and communication would be suited to improve the company's contact with environmental and traffic NGOs in the long run?

Actually, questions of that type are the focal research issues of IÖW's work on environmental reporting. The "path towards a good environmental report" recommended by IÖW suggests a preparatory dialogue with target groups to avoid ensuing conflicts of the type described above.

On the occasion of their first environmental reporting, the railway company started a dialogue with environmental and traffic NGOs. To prepare that first environmental report, IÖW, on behalf of the company's environmental department BUZ (Bahn-Umwelt-Zentrum), invited a number of environmental and traffic NGOs to a workshop in spring 1995.

The course of a series of workshops resulting from this initiative will now be described in a deliberately detailed and understandable manner. Specific contents will be treated as confidential, as was agreed upon – the text will instead focus on the new type of cooperation and related insights. Results, experiences and perspectives will finally be outlined.

The First Workshop – its Range of Issues and its Rules

DB's first workshop with environmental and traffic NGOs was arranged to prepare DB's first environmental report. It was jointly organized and moderated by IÖW and 'future e.V.', a German environmental business organization. Two questions were of prior importance:

- Did DB's current "major environmental issues" represent a complete and adequate list, or should the railway company, from the NGOs' point of view, concentrate on further issues as well?
- Which of the many issues should absolutely be included in the environmental report and which were of particular information value to the NGOs?

As preparatory information, DB AG provided a short version of its report on the present state of affairs regarding its long-term ecological concept. NGOs, too, were invited to produce documents to be sent to all participants for preparation.

The workshop took place on March 27/28, 1995, in Berlin. At first, DB AG presented its report on the state of affairs regarding its long-term ecological concept, and elements of its ecological product strategy. Then DB's environmental strategy and programme were discussed with regard to a selection of topics for the first environmental report.

Two days of intensive debate resulted in a slight modification of DB's concept for its first environmental report. Its plan to represent its services and its role as an 'environmentally acceptable traffic mode' gained support from the NGOs, whereas its intention to treat in detail the problems of soil cleanup and sewage treatment systems met with little interest. Instead, a representation of those issues was required that are perceived as highly relevant by the public. Consequently, there was a differentiated discussion on "green environment along the rails", pesticides use, and noise.

All participants advocated a further dialogue with DB AG. A future cooperation was concretized by the following suggestions:

- support DB AG in gaining customers
- make efforts towards producing an environmental audit for the company
- make DB AG-employees participate in the overall process
- settle individual conflicts through cooperation of the railway company and environmental NGOs, and
- have environmental NGOs participate in individual DB AG-projects for a change

These suggestions for cooperation at the end of the first workshop, however, were somewhat unsystematic and rather reflected the participants' intentions to cooperate than being actual possibilities for cooperation.

The "Rules"

Due to the positive response of the persons invited to the first workshop, DB AG decided to conduct regular workshops, and publicly committed itself to do so through a respective statement in its environmental report. So, a set of rules for further workshops were developed, in cooperation with IÖW:

- Invitation to the workshops as well as their organization and moderation will be the tasks of an impartial institute.
- Invitations will be mailed at very long notice, so as to allow for preparation in view of the democratic structures of the NGOs.
- Discussions are confidential. Minutes are not handed to third parties.
- The German railway company will be the host.

The Second Workshop – First "Hot Potatoes"

During preparation of the second workshop, the NGOs were, for the first time, given the opportunity to suggest issues for debate. To this purpose, they were asked about their interests. In view of their democratic structures, they were to submit their answer only after a comparably long period of six weeks. Almost all NGOs proposed topics from the fields of company-internal environmental protection *and* of traffic policy. Responsible for company-internal environmental protection is BUZ itself, the initiator of the sequence of workshops. As to traffic policy, BUZ asks suitable partners from other fields of work to join the workshop.

Out of the wide range of proposed subjects, DB AG selected 'regional railway networks' as traffic-political issue, and waste, noise abatement as well as pesticides as environmental issues. The NGOs were then informed about DB's choice and given the opportunity to work out questions or opinions to be sent to all participants, together with the definite invitation. Six NGOs made use of this possibility. Although such a procedure may seem complicated, it ensures a maximum degree of openness of the process. Participation of the NGOs is thereby

achieved already at the stage of setting the agenda and preparing debate. Several instances of learning occur in the course of this process:

process element	possible moments of learning
The NGOs propose subjects for dialogue.	DB AG becomes aware of the topicality of issues.
DB AG selects subjects for the workshop agenda.	The NGOs recognize which subjects are judged by DB AG to be particularly topical and to allow a dialogue.
The NGOs formulate opinions and questions addressed to the railway company.	DB AG comes to know what specific individual interests are associated with certain subjects. Its representatives can thus prepare to discuss the respective opinions and to answer the respective questions.
DB AG provides information in advance concerning the dialogue subjects	The NGOs can prepare for the discussion.
The workshop takes place.	Participants learn from each other.
Minutes are formulated by moderators and approved by DB AG-representatives.	DB AG-representatives and moderators jointly reflect on the process.
Minutes are sent to all participants.	All participants obtain a document about the results and can refer to it the following year.

Apart from discussions, the second workshop included a visit of the modern railway power plant 'Kirchmöser' with its particularly high energetic efficiency, as one experience of DB's efforts towards environmental protection.

The four issues were discussed with much commitment, but nevertheless in a friendly atmosphere. Some participants seemed quite surprised about "the other side's" frankness. Moderators noticed, both in the second and the third workshop, that initially sceptical participants lost their reservations in the course of the dialogue. Persons who, in the first place, had presented their arguments in a rather reserved way recognized positive reactions of the other side and argued in a more and more open way as debate went on.

Furthermore, in the course of the discussion about short-distance and surface-covering traffic, it was pointed out explicitly for the first time that this dialogue was not primarily meant to contain risk and to avoid scandals through providing information in advance. Instead, relations between DB AG and environmental and traffic NGOs were essentially shaped by a supportive attitude on the part of the NGOs. So, for all their scepticism concerning specific details, some representatives of DB AG realized that the railway company's relation with the NGOs did not match the general pattern of bad relationship between companies and environmental and traffic NGOs. Compared to its competitors, the railway company can count on rather broad support.

In the course of the workshop, several participants expressed their opinion that DB AG could translate some of the dialogue results into reality. Consequently, it was agreed to report about the realization of such proposals at the next workshop one year later.

The Third Workshop – Results and New Issues

It was part of the moderator's role to organize a DB AG report on recommendations of the previous workshop. For that purpose, the previous four topics, the traffic issue and the three environmental issues, were shortly summarized. In that initial stage, the third workshop presented itself, in particular towards new participants, as of a rather cooperative than confronting character. Not every individual aspect of the previous meeting was reported, nevertheless DB's good intention to practice continuous cooperation with the NGOs became clear.

The new issues were energy and freight traffic, and again some NGOs seized the opportunity to prepare an extensive range of questions so as to elicit detailed information from the railway company.

Like the year before, the individual issues were intensively discussed, participants from both sides showed commitment and competence. A surprising list of suggestions for action were made, and for some of them implementation was promised, by representatives of both the NGOs and the railway company.

Results, Experiences and Perspectives

DB's series of workshops develops long-term relations with environmental and traffic NGOs. It turns out after the third workshop that this initiative intensifies both parties' readiness to communicate. At the same time, interest in mutual cooperation grows.

To pave the way for such a development, it has proved important to abandon public discussions, where, after all, both sides are under public pressure. Instead, more confidential framework conditions allow the parties to better know each other. DB AG so-to-speak expresses particular trust in the small circle of workshop participants by conveying confidential information to them. This information, its discussion, and moreover the recognition that individual members of the DB AG staff may very well have a critical view of their company's policy, have led to a more realistic assessment of DB AG as a large organization and to less prejudices.

On the other hand, members of the DB AG staff have gained insights into perspectives and opinions of representatives of the environmental and traffic organizations, which so far they used to perceive only as critics and naysayers.

Initially in 1996, and far more distinctly in 1997, this basis of personal acquaintance developed into an atmosphere of being able to jointly tackle tangible common projects. There is a certain tradition for such cooperation between DB AG and environmental NGOs:

- DB AG has cooperated for years with WWF, the World Wide Fund for Nature, e.g. in preparing the "Kilometerbilanz" (kilometre balance), a comparison of traffic systems.
- Together with BUND, the German Friends of the Earth, DB AG pursues a common project "Mehrweg im Zug" (packaging reuse in the train).

The third workshop led furthermore to a number of projects to be carried out by the railway company or the NGOs alone respectively. Activities range from the promotion of research on certain, ecologically desirable issues, via mutual information about individual projects, to initiatives for positively modifying the framework conditions for the railway.

What, then, will have to be done to achieve these goals elaborated in the workshops?

First, both sides should not cease to take the workshops seriously. They will have to allocate the necessary time for attending these meetings. They will have to ensure regular participation of competent and influential actors. A number of stand-ins for regular participants rather complicated the dialogue in the past. Apart from the participants' reliable attendance, it is also

their function and position in their respective organizations which influences a successful outcome of the sessions.

Second, also the "hot potatoes" will have to be dealt with. Up to now, their discussion in the workshops has largely been avoided, with the exception of pesticides use. Other issues, like rail closure, new lines for high-speed trains, and the "Transrapid", a magnetic levitation railway, so far at best discussed in private conversation in the pub, will sooner or later have to become topics of this dialogue.

Apart from the important fact that DB AG is an environment-friendly common carrier, this dialogue obviously means another competitive advantage for the railway company: DB AG knows in advance those arguments which otherwise it would have had to face as criticism at a later stage.