2
The CORE Programme in Belarus after the Chornobyl accident

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Abstract

Building on the success of the co-expertise approach of the ETHOS project (1996-2001), the Chernobyl Committee of Belarus launched the Cooperation Programme for the Rehabilitation of Living Conditions in the Areas Affected by Chornobyl in Belarus (CORE Programme) in 2005. Based on an original governance framework designed to identify, evaluate, and monitor projects proposed by local stakeholders the programme aimed to sustainably improve radiological protection and living conditions in four Belarusian districts. The implementation of local projects was deployed in four priority areas: health, economic development, radiation protection, and education/memory. After a presentation of the governance framework, this article describes the key local projects developed in the four domains of action that were structuring the programme and finally draws a few key lessons. It is worth mentioning that the CORE programme, supported by numerous international organizations and NGOs, enabled partnerships and cooperation among local, national, and international stakeholders.

Introduction

The ETHOS approach led to three major observations (Hériard-Dubreuil et al., 2007; Lochard, 2004). Firstly, the radiological, health, ecological, economic, societal and ethical consequences of the Chornobyl accident are long-term in nature, requiring the development of new radiological protection methods that actively involve the affected populations. Secondly, the post-accident situation in Belarus — and the challenge of rehabilitating living conditions — encompasses local, national, and international dimensions, all of which must be

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addressed within a framework that promotes interaction and complementarity among these different levels of action. Finally, the ETHOS project revealed that the various dimensions of rehabilitating living conditions mentioned above cannot be addressed in isolation. A sustainable approach to rehabilitation demands integrated strategies that consider the problem in its entirety.

The CORE programme — officially titled Cooperation for Rehabilitation of Living Conditions in Chernobyl-Affected Areas of Belarus — was initiated by the Chernobyl Committee of Belarus following the conclusions of the Stolyn International seminar held in November 2001 and the UNDP report (UNDP/UNICEF, 2002). It took more than two years to prepare the CORE Programme and in particular to gather the partners, including three United Nations agencies (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the French Embassy in Belarus, the European TACIS programme, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and the European Partnership Committee (CEP), which brought together several French organizations (ASN, IRSN, *Patrimoines sans Frontières*, Agro-Paris-Tech, FERT, *Médecins du Monde*, Mutadis Consultants, CEPN, ACRO). The CORE programme was officially launched in 2004 for a period of 5 years.

The primary objective of the programme, derived directly from the Stolyn declaration, was to make sustainable improvements to the living conditions in four of the affected Belarusian regions by facilitating the development of local projects in four key domains: health, economic development, radiological quality of food, feed, and the environment, and education/memory.

The programme supported by numerous international organizations and NGOs fostered partnerships and cooperation among local, national, and international stakeholders. It introduced an original governance framework designed to identify, evaluate, and monitor projects proposed by local stakeholders.

Between 2004 and 2008, 191 local projects were proposed, of which 146 were approved and implemented across the four priority areas. The total budget for the programme amounted to €4.3 million, with contributions from Belarusian organizations and eight international partners (Trafimchick, 2005).

1. The governance and operating principles

The governance framework and operating principles were directly inspired by the spirit of the ETHOS project and the lessons learned. Developed during numerous meetings, they culminated in the CORE programme's Declaration of Principles for Cooperation, signed by the participants on July 18, 2003 (see Annexe). According to this declaration, the programme aimed to *"improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of certain districts by engaging directly with them and helping them to formulate proposals for specific individual and collective projects"*. For the inhabitants of the areas affected by the Chornobyl Accident, this represented a real innovative approach. The governance structure of the programme is presented in Box 1.

Box 1. The governance structure of the CORE programme

- The Preparation and Assessment Committee (PAC), responsible for evaluating and selecting local projects.
- The Approval Committee (AC), responsible for approving local project proposals.
- The Coordination Team (CT), responsible for assisting the PAC, and the AC by organizing workshops in the selected districts. It was also in charge of providing support to local project partners in the day-to-day management of their activities and identifying potential new partners at the local, national, and international levels.
- The Priority Area Liaison Committees, advisory bodies responsible for formulating recommendations and opinions regarding the implementation of various local projects in each priority area.

Annually, a workshop was organized in each district at which local projects were proposed by local people, evaluated by the Preparation and Assessment Committee and finally approved or not by the Approval Committee. Prior to these meetings, significant events were organized to commemorate the accident. For example, in Bragin, the district authorities, accompanied by the Minister of Chernobyl and the French Ambassador, laid a wreath at the foot of the statue representing the Bragin firefighter who died from radioactive burns while fighting the fire at the Chornobyl nuclear power plant (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the participation of the local population in the workshop. Each workshop was an opportunity to review the activities undertaken in the program and also to spend time with the local population. About two months before each workshop, the coordination team visited the districts to invite residents to prepare project proposals and to give them guidance on the application process to increase their chances of acceptance. Figure 3 presents the meeting of the Preparation and Assessment Committee composed of local people and national and international experts including former members of the ETHOS team. Figure 4 shows the Approval Committee, chaired by the Minister of Chernobyl, in the presence of dignitaries, including representatives of the European Partnership Committee and, in this instance, former members of the ETHOS Team. Figure 5 shows the Priority Area Liaison Meeting on radiological quality, held two days later, in the presence of representatives from the other districts involved in radiological quality projects. Finally Figure 6 shows the coordination team at work in its headquarters in Minsk.

FIGURE 1. Ceremony at the Bragin monument (photo: J. Lochard).

FIGURE 2. The Bragin workshop (photos: J. Lochard).

FIGURE 3. The Meeting of the Preparation and Assessment Committee (photo: J. Lochard).

FIGURE 4. Meeting of the Approval Board (photo: J. Lochard).

FIGURE 5. Meeting of the Priority Area Liaison Committee on radiological quality (photo: J. Lochard).

FIGURE 6. The Coordination Team at work (photo: J. Lochard).

The CORE programme was implemented according to a set of fundamental principles. To ensure that the rehabilitation of living conditions in the contaminated territories was sustainable, all dimensions relating to the quality of life were integrated in the programme, and local people were involved in the design and implementation of activities. Participants joined the programme voluntarily by signing a declaration. New participants were approved by the Approval Board, and each participant retained the right to propose new projects or leave the programme at any time. The programme's primary objective was to coordinate and support the implementation of projects aimed at improving the living conditions of the population in contaminated territories. The programme was also based on non-profit activities, with the majority of funding allocated to strengthening the capacity of local actors to address issues identified in the priority areas. Furthermore no participant could dominate activities, based on territorial, financial, political, religious, or other characteristics, and each participant had the right to propose programme-related issues for fair and equitable discussion. All of these principles and provisions aimed at guaranteeing respect for strong ethical values such as the freedom for each individual to engage or withdraw, and the respect for the past and present local actions carried out by each participant in the CORE programme (in as much as they contributed to individual and collective well-being). Overall, these characteristics, beyond their contractual nature, ensured the smooth and successful implementation of the programme's activities which were also open to amendment in order for participants to be able to adapt to evolving conditions and make rapid collective decisions in the interests of the implementation of the CORE programme.

2. The commitment of local actors

As outlined in the objectives of the CORE programme (see *The Declaration of Principles* in Annexe), the activities undertaken were based on a participatory governance approach. This approach encouraged the active and voluntary cooperation of various stakeholders from both the public and private sectors, working together toward a comprehensive territorial rehabilitation project that took into account the specific contamination conditions in the areas where people were living.

The CORE programme relied on two main pillars. Firstly, financial, administrative, and organizational support for local initiatives aimed at improving living conditions adversely affected by the accident, through partnerships with local actors and other stakeholders, and donors at the national and international levels. Secondly, a multi-level mechanism of integration, coordination, and decision-making, which enabled a shared sense of ownership regarding the rehabilitation of living conditions among all those involved. These mechanisms also facilitated the progressive emergence of a common vision of the problem, a shared purpose, and a collective evaluation of results.

The key difference between the CORE programme and "classic" humanitarian projects was that the CORE programme was built on the results and experience of the ETHOS project, whereby the local population was not merely a beneficiary of the actions undertaken, but was also actively engaged in the design and implementation of small and medium-sized recovery projects.

3. The priority areas

The CORE programme focused on four districts — Bragin, Slavgorod, Chechersk, and Stolyn — out of the 21 contaminated districts in Belarus (Figure 7). Over a period of five years (2004–2009), it concentrated on four priority areas for actions: health of people including the health system, the radiological quality of food, feed, and the environment; the economic development of rural areas with a particular emphasis on agriculture, and the education of children and the preservation of the collective memory of the accident.

FIGURE 7. Location of the districts where the CORE programme was implemented (Drawing Zoia Trafimchik).

3.1. *Agriculture*

Within the framework of the CORE programme, a "microcredit scheme" for small agricultural producers (supplementary family farming) was developed and successfully implemented for the first time in Belarus. A guarantee fund was established at *Belarusbank* through funding provided by the *Foundation for the Development and Renewal of the Earth (FERT)*. As a result, more than 100 microcredits were granted between 2005 and 2007, with 100% of the financing repaid. Two agricultural development centres were also set up in Stolyn and Slavgorod to provide scientific, technical, informational, and administrative support for the economic initiatives of local stakeholders.

In several districts, modern technologies were introduced and traditional practices improved to increase both the volume and quality of agricultural production in the private sector, particularly in terms of radiological safety. These improvements involved a whole series of activities: vegetable production, including the introduction of drip irrigation systems; garlic production; beekeeping; utilizing modern equipment; pig breeding; milk production, including the use of feed additives in cattle rations; potato production; and poultry farming.

Building on the model of the ETHOS project, cooperation was developed between family-based initiatives for growing supplementary agricultural products and state-owned processing companies. Agronomists and radiation protection experts selected varieties and species of products that offered both attractive productivity levels and lower caesium transfer factors, making them suitable for cultivation on family plots in contaminated areas. For example, targeted cultivation and delivery of cucumbers to the Gorynsky canning factory in Stolyn and courgettes to the Bykhov canning factory were organized.

School fruit gardens, greenhouses, and mushroom-growing areas were created or rehabilitated to improve the diet of children in schools and kindergartens. Occasionally, surplus produce of the highest radiological and gustatory standards was sold for profit (e.g., the *"Dream Garden"* of the Mercoulovitchskaya School in the Chechersk district, the *vechenka* mushroom-growing area of the Nissimkovitchskaya School in the Chechersk district, and the greenhouse of the Stolyn Gymnasium).

Other activities were also developed, including garment-making and pottery in the Stolyn district, services for the elderly in the Chechersk district (such as ploughing land and sawing firewood) and agritourism in the village of Mikhailovo in the Slavgorod district. The information resources and organizational infrastructure were strengthened in educational and cultural institutions to support vocational guidance for children and young people (e.g., gardening at the Mercoulovitchskaya School in the Chechersk district; pottery in the village of Gorodnaya in the Stolyn district; sewing at the Children's Creative House in Slavgorod).

3.2. *Health*

The health priority area of the CORE programme aimed to *"improve the health of the population by enhancing primary healthcare services, health education, and monitoring of pregnant women and children"*. More specifically, this component

of the programme sought not only to improve existing healthcare services in contaminated territories but also to raise awareness among residents regarding the potential health effects associated with chronic exposure to ionizing radiation. Various activities focused on improving the information resources available to populations and disseminating a practical radiation protection culture.

Over a period of six years (2004-2009), more than 30 projects related to the *"Health priority area"* were proposed, of which 20 were funded and implemented. The CORE programme distinguished between "topical" projects — characterized by the involvement of partners from local, national, and international structures with substantial budgets — and "small" projects, which were primarily implemented by local actors. In total, 7 topical projects and 13 small projects were carried out.

In general, the projects conducted under the heath priority area focused on four distinct but complementary themes: (i) the provision of equipment, both for the diagnosis and treatment of pathologies as well as for the improvement of social and educational structures, (iii) the training of health professionals, (ii) the information and awareness of populations, and (iv) the health monitoring of the population.

The initiators and local professionals involved in these projects were primarily the staff of health establishments (hospitals, clinics) and educational structures (kindergartens, elementary schools, and colleges) in the districts participating in the CORE programme, as well as representatives of Belarusian universities, the Ministry of Education, and international partners. At the outset of the CORE programme, the inhabitants of the contaminated districts undertook relatively few individual initiatives to improve their health status, often due to economic difficulties and limited opportunities to enhance their living conditions. However, this situation gradually evolved toward a real and active commitment from local actors in the implementation of projects.

Medical records from the affected areas document numerous pathologies directly or indirectly linked to the aftermath of the Chornobyl accident. The connection between 1,800 cases of thyroid cancer in children and the radioactive consequences of the disaster has been recognized. The radiation-induced nature of the excessive incidence of thyroid cancer among individuals exposed to iodine radionuclides during childhood and adolescence has been substantiated as a result of the radiation monitoring system. Several CORE projects led to the strengthening of equipment and materials available for the screening and treatment of various pathologies, whether potentially induced by the presence of radioactivity or not.

For example, the project *"Improving the State of Health of Patients Suffering from Thyroid Cancer or Other Thyroid Pathologies"* enabled the Stolyn Hospital to acquire all the equipment necessary for the screening and treatment of thyroid pathologies (including hormonal assays). The hospital subsequently obtained a license in endocrinology and was able to provide care for patients. Similarly, the *"Say No to Cancer"* project modernized cancer diagnosis and treatment equipment in 16 dispensaries and hospitals in the Bragin district. The project *"Contribution to Improving the State of Health of Children in the Chechersk District"* resulted in the provision of devices for the Chechersk District Hospital

to conduct clinical examinations of children (ultrasound devices, electrocardiographs, haematological analysers, etc.).

Several small projects focused on improving or creating reception facilities for sick or disabled children. One example is the *"Creation of Children's Health Centres"* project, implemented in the Stolyn district. Others concerned educational structures. For instance, the *"I Take Care of Myself, I Protect Myself"* project led to the construction of a new sports complex in the Stolyn district, which is now regularly used for sports sessions. The complex is equipped to facilitate exercises and games that strengthen the musculoskeletal system.

Nearly 25 years after the Chornobyl accident, the CORE programme partners observed that many health professionals lacked knowledge regarding the issues raised by a situation of long-lasting contamination. They also struggled to engage in dialogue with their patients on this topic. Most of the projects carried out within the health priority area therefore aimed to raise awareness, train health professionals in radiation protection, and improve the capacity of these professionals to support and inform their patients.

The *"Health and Family"* project was particularly effective in raising awareness among health professionals. Its main objectives were to increase their awareness of the problems posed by a situation of long-lasting contamination. The focus was on improving training of those involved in paediatric services, through continuing education. During this project, the Pinsk branch of the Radiology Research Institute (BB-RIR) developed educational modules that, after validation by the Belarusian Ministry of Health, were offered as optional courses in medical schools for general practitioners and nurses. Through theoretical lessons and practical work, this course pursued the dual objective of (i) providing students with in-depth knowledge of the practices and behaviour that enable families living in contaminated territories to better protect their health, and (ii) to teach them how to work effectively with the population.

Thanks to the provision of equipment and numerous awareness-raising initiatives for health professionals, the CORE programme enabled a significant improvement in the care services offered in the participating districts. Local health professionals demonstrated a remarkable capacity to assimilate new knowledge and operate modern medical equipment, thereby becoming the main contributors to the success of the projects. In many cases, they benefited from partnerships with national and international experts, who provided valuable technical support. Furthermore, these collaborations often led to exchanges that allowed for a mutual enrichment of practices and knowledge.

It should also be noted that certain professionals in the educational sector were also involved in awareness-raising and training initiatives. For example, through the provision of equipment in educational structures, they collaborated with health professionals and radiation protection experts. Examples of such cooperation include the project *"Establishment of Children's Health Homes"* and the project *"I Take Care of Myself, I Protect Myself"*, both implemented in the Stolyn district.

A limited number of projects focused on observing and monitoring the health status of inhabitants living in contaminated territories and on understanding the potential health effects associated with chronic low-dose exposure. The main project addressing this issue was the thematic project *"Contribution to Improving the Health Status of Children in the Chechersk District"*.

3.3. *Radiological Quality*

The institutional radiation monitoring and control system implemented in the territories in the years following the accident did little to help the population understand or regain control over their situation. Measurements — beyond their technical complexity — were often difficult to comprehend, and the fact that they were rarely shared or explained to the population tended to increase anxiety and concern rather than alleviate them. Surveys conducted in the early 1990s in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia highlighted that the complexity of daily life in a contaminated environment led to a loss of control and a feeling of abandonment among residents (Lochard, 2013). Classical communication approaches proved ineffective in providing comprehensive and useful information to help people manage their situation. In practice, the absence of individual knowledge and adequate opportunity to control the radiological quality of food at the family level resulted in a significant increase in exposures, particularly among children, during the 1990s.

Building on the experience of the ETHOS project, the concept of an operational and "inclusive" monitoring system was developed and tested in several settlements and schools as part of the "*Radiological Quality*" priority areas of the CORE programme (Hériard-Dubreuil et al., 2007).

Commenced in the Bragin district, the project supported the creation of "Local Centers for the Promotion of a Practical Radiological Protection Culture" in the Chechersk, Slavgorod, and later on in the Khoiniki districts (Schneider and Lochard, 2026). From 2008, schools in Rovkavitchi, Voznesenskii, Polessie, Strelichevo, were equipped and the centres were modernized in the Bragin district, or reviltalized such as the one in the Communo-Leninskaya school of the Chechersk district, or in the educational and advisory centre for radioecology and radiation safety at the Vaskovitchskaya school in the Slavgorod district.

These Local Centers for the Promotion of a Practical Radiological Protection Culture were established during the 2000s with maintenance ensured by the Research Institute of Radiology in Gomel. Dosimetrists — or *"radiometrists"* — were trained to advise the population and provide practical recommendations regarding their behaviour and lifestyle that could reduce individual exposure at the family level. Their tasks initially included sampling and measurement of radiocaesium activity concentrations in food products (orchards, vegetable gardens, forest berries and mushrooms, game, and river fish) gathered by local inhabitants and private producers (hay, milk, etc.), as well as monitoring the surrounding environment and living spaces (ambient dose rates). The next step was to organize meetings to provide information and opportunities for dialogue, and for presenting pupils' activities in school

projects, and conducting local workshops and radiation protection projects involving pupils, parents, and expert counsellors. Then, based on the interpretation of measurements from whole-body counters (WBC) *"critical groups"* (the most contaminated children) were identified. Dialogues with their families where organized to find ways to reduce individual doses, and, if necessary, recommended specific medical follow-up (involving local medical professionals). Finally, informational leaflets about the radiological situation in the territory were produced and disseminated, through local media (newspapers), public buildings, and the internet.

Among the projects implemented within the *"Radiological Quality"* priority area, the Bragin radiation monitoring project significantly deepened the experience and refined the co-expertise process initiated in the ETHOS project (Croüail and Bataille, 2005; Croüail et al., 2006; Bataille et al., 2008a). The project's objective was to develop a practical radiation protection culture among the population and encourage self-help protection actions to reduce contamination, particularly among children, based on the lessons of the project developed in Olmany in the Stolyn district. Using existing infrastructures to measure caesium-137 in food and in the body of inhabitants and with new equipment provided by project partners, the local professionals (medical doctors, nurses, teachers) were able, with the support of national and international experts, to significantly reduce the internal contamination of the 3,000 children living in the Bragin district, and 2,500 pupils living in the Chechersk district. Figure 8 presents the system implemented in the Bragin district to follow the internal contamination of school children and Table 1 presents the results obtained.

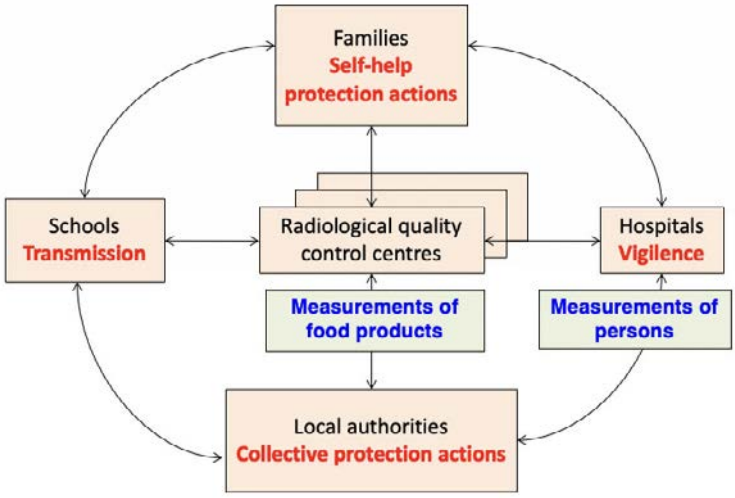

FIGURE 8. The radiation monitoring system implemented in the Bragin district (Bataille et al., 2008b).

Table 1. Results of the whole-body measurement campaigns in the Bragin district during the CORE Project (Bataille et al., 2008b).

	Number of measure-ments	**Mean value (Bq/kg)**	**Maximum value (Bq/kg)**	**Number of measure-ments >50 Bq/kg**	**Number of measure-ments > 100 Bq/kg**
Autumn 04	2 592	~32	2 660	249	64
Spring 05	2 526	~29	260	134	18
Autumn 05	2 612	~24	190	109	12
Spring 06	2 530	~25	168	50	4
Autumn 06	2 486	~31	980	242	43
Spring 07	2 438	~23	247	32	3
Autumn 07	1 705	~14	235	86	7

3.4. *Education and Memory*

Raising awareness and informing populations about the potential health effects associated with chronic exposure to radiation — and about lifestyles that reduce exposure levels — were major components of all CORE projects. For example, the *"Health and Maternity"* project, coordinated by the Brest branch of the Institute for Research on Radiology (BB-RIR), helped disseminate a practical radiation protection culture to pregnant women and nursing mothers living in the contaminated territories of the Stolyn district. By developing a radiation protection culture, the project aimed to minimize the risk of foetal exposure and reduce the level of contamination in breast milk.

Several other projects resulted in the production of new types of information. For instance, as part of the thematic project *"Improving the State of Health of Patients Suffering from Thyroid Cancer or Other Thyroid Pathologies"* (previously mentioned), an information brochure titled *"Primer for Patients Suffering from Thyroid Pathologies"* was created for patients. The small project *"Involving the Population in Improving Their Health"* also led to the publication of 2 books and 8 brochures. In most cases, health professionals chose to develop these documents in cooperation with local people to ensure they were tailored to their expectations and needs. It is worth noting that the literature available before the CORE programme was often too theoretical, providing generic and impersonal information, not targeted at specific audiences, for example different age groups, genders, professions, etc.

Public information was considerably reinforced during the 2000s, particularly to prevent the consumption of wild products (berries, mushrooms, river fish, and game) and to mitigate the consequences of the accident in areas that had not been decontaminated (through measures such as limiting free grazing,

restricting or prohibiting the gathering or harvesting of forest products, and reconstruction of roads).

All of the above underscores the importance of preserving the memory of the accident and transmitting the lessons learned to younger generations still living in affected territories.

Within the framework of the CORE programme, many cultural projets — based on both scientific (e.g., the creation of practical radiation protection culture clubs in schools) and artistic foundations (e.g., the *"Tell Me, Cloud..."* and *"Lost Villages"* projects) — were conducted. These projects involved many inhabitants who had experienced the aftermath of the accident and enabled the collection of testimonies, objects, photos, literature, poems, paintings, and drawings. Several projects increased attention from both Belarusians and the international community regarding the affected territories (Ayrault et al., 2006). Most importantly, these initiatives allowed residents, and especially children, to reclaim the memory of places that had disappeared (such as buried villages) or those still contaminated, as well as the relentless efforts made by their parents or grandparents to rebuild and revitalize their communities.

Among these various projects, those developed in the Bragin district are particularly noteworthy. Thanks to the Bragin municipal librarian, a local working group initiated a reflection on the symbolic and cultural dimensions of the consequences of the Chornobyl accident. The group identified: a profound destabilization of the relationship with the homeland, a key element of culture and traditions, and an irreversible break between "before" and "after" Chornobyl. Furthermore, a generational break was apparent between those who lived through the disaster, and younger people, which highlighted the difficult question on "how to talk about the disaster and the contamination to young people"? The group also mentioned discrimination within the affected territories, and how their inhabitants were compared to the rest of Belarus and the World, which reinforced the feeling that the contamination was everywhere, every day but remained invisible. How to represent it and talk about it? Finally, the group noticed that traditionally, the memory of Chornobyl is evoked by commemorations and tributes to the victims (Figure 9) and it therefore decided to explore new ways of understanding the disaster and transmitting its memory effectively at the local, national, and international levels.

A key question was to identify the symbolic and commemorative dimensions that could contribute to the future of the affected areas. To this end, the group decided first to listen to and record what the population was saying. What emerged from this dialogue was mainly that the accident induced an irreplaceable loss. Sentences like the following were pronounced: "Here we have buried earth", or "We abandon everything, lost, everything, even the names of the villages were erased" and "They even buried Dostoyevsky and Shakespeare" (referring to buried libraries). But the group emphasised also the feeling of abandonment and oblivion from the general population of Belarus "They don't want us, the Chernobylians, elsewhere. We've been forgotten, it's easier".

Finally, based on the above reflections, the group embarked on a series of original activities in cooperation with French experts from the French Association "Patrimoine sans frontières" as well as Belarusian artists. At the newly renovated

Bragin Museum, four new projects on memory were implemented: an exhibition of works by painters native to the 30 km exclusion zone (Figure 10), a tribute to the young firefighter of Bragin victim of the accident, an exhibition of objects from the 30 km exclusion zone, and the creation of "The Lost Land" exhibition (Figure 11).

FIGURE 9. The Bragin monument in memory of the disappeared (razed) villages of the District (photo: J. Lochard).

FIGURE 10. Works from native painters (photos: J. Lochard).

This last project was developed through a collaborative effort between the residents of Bragin (six groups of adult volunteers), artists and museum professionals. During the preparation phase, the residents crafted a narrative of what they had seen and experienced. They expressed their suffering, but also the beauty of their land and the reasons for their desire to remain there ("This is our place"). They also gathered documents (testimonies, documents, photos, etc.). The exhibition, developed in an exemplary spirit of co-expertise, enabled the construction of a shared narrative (involving residents and local professionals) about the situation. The project offered a different way of approaching the accident and experiencing the situation that followed. It sought to establish a link between the past (the disaster), the present (life in the affected areas), and the future. It is also a tool for sharing, communication, and education for children, without relying on technology. It focuses on the meaning of the accident and life in the affected areas, rather than on its management (Figure 11).

FIGURE 11. The Lost Land Exhibition (photo: J. Lochard).

Concluding remarks

Before the implementation of the CORE programme, inhabitants of the contaminated districts took relatively few individual initiatives to improve their own health or radiological quality of their environment. This was largely due to economic difficulties and limited opportunities to enhance their living conditions. However, this situation gradually evolved as the CORE projects were implemented and advanced.

The objective of the programme, and of the associated local projects, was to help rehabilitate the living conditions of residents through an improvement in practical radiological protection. An inclusive radiation monitoring system (including self-monitoring) enabled inhabitants to assess the radiological situation in their own living areas. Direct access to monitoring equipment allowed them to regain control over the situation through a better understanding of the mechanisms by which humans are exposed (e.g., internal and external exposures, radioactivity in food, living spaces, and the environment).

The strengthening of medical and health surveillance, in accordance with the precautionary principle, aimed at detecting and treating pathologies and health problems that developed either as a consequence of chronic exposure to radioactivity or the strong disruption of the socio-economic fabric of the territory, caused by the radiological situation. The development, through the education system, of a strategy for the intergenerational transmission of a practical radiation protection culture was also a key focus. The resumption of the local economy, particularly small and medium-scale private farming, was another priority.

The co-expertise activities implemented in the CORE programme enhanced the post-accident recovery process in Belarus. Various projects were effective, thereby demonstrating how integrated measures and cooperation between all stakeholders can work on the ground, for example, local radiological monitoring centres, whole-body counting initiatives or micro-credit for small farmers. Moreover, the training of local dosimetrists, and the equipment of local centres able to run repeated whole-body counting campaigns improved the local technical capacity and created long-lasting local practices (individual monitoring, educational clubs, school projects). These capacities made it easier for local administrations and health services to continue the experience gained after the CORE funding ended.

Other beneficial outputs from the Core programme included:

- Establishment of multi-level governance mechanisms like the Approval Board, the Preparation & Assessment Committee, the Priority Area Liaison Committees and the Coordination Team, that modelled participatory decision-making and multi-stakeholder project selection. This mechanism was later referenced as an institutional model in UN/partner evaluations for best practice for community ownership. Finally, UNDP and CORE partners documented the programme as a promising model and influenced subsequent UN programming and donor priorities.
- Provision of valuable insights into the dynamics of co-expertise to address complex post-disaster challenges. The cooperation between the local populations, authorities, and external experts highlighted both the strengths of this approach and the challenges inherent in its long-term implementation.
- Demonstration that local projects are most effective when they foster individual control over the situation, enabling personal fulfilment and a sense of agency among affected populations. This was particularly reenforced because the programme created a cultural context that resonated with local values, traditions, and aspirations and also ensured

intergenerational continuity, embedding knowledge and practices within the community for the long term.

- Involvement of local authorities strongly supported by higher administrative levels (regional, national, and international) was crucial to ensure coordination, resources, and legitimacy. Foreign expertise played also a key role, particularly in contexts where confidence in national authorities was particularly eroded. External experts can provide technical knowledge, methodological support, and an objective perspective, helping to rebuild trust and capacity.

Finally, the CORE programme demonstrated on a larger scale than the ETHOS project the effectiveness of local rehabilitation projects when they are imagined, designed, and desired by the population itself. Projects imposed from the outside, without local buy-in, are far less likely to succeed or be sustainable. The CORE programme underscored the importance of listening to and engaging stakeholders in genuine dialogue, ensuring that their voices, concerns, and ideas shape the co-expertise process.

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Annexe: Declaration of principles on the CORE programme

"Co-operation for Rehabilitation of living conditions in Chernobyl affected areas in Belarus"

The undersigned, including national and regional authorities, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), potential donors and others providing expertise (referred to hereunder as "Participants") agree to the following Declaration:

In appreciation of

- the efforts undertaken by the Republic of Belarus and the world community to mitigate the consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) accident of 26 April 1986;
- the fact that the consequences of the Chernobyl accident for people have not gone away, at the same time as the level of national and international support to the contaminated areas has declined;
- the fact that the impact of Chernobyl on the contaminated areas is not only a local and national problem but a global concern for the world community;
- the urgent need of handling the long-term consequences of radioactive contamination for the mankind and its environment;
- several international assessments of the continuing impact of the Chernobyl disaster[11];
- the conviction that there is a need for a new sustainable rehabilitation and development-based approach. This should integrate health, economic and social development, environment, food, education and culture to address the actual and long-term needs of the affected populations and the civil society. Complementary to the above, donors should co-ordinate their activity so that their support efficiently reaches the people and communities most affected, and achieves the expected results.

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[1] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report on "The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: a Strategy for Recovery" (25 January 2002): see www.un.minsk.by; the World Bank report "Belarus: Chernobyl Review" (15 July 2002): see www.worldbank.org.by; the reports of the Heads of Mission/Delegation of the European Union about their visits (April 2001 and May 2003) to the contaminated areas of Belarus sent to the Presidency and the Commission; Rehabilitation of the living conditions in territories contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear accident – contribution of the ETHOS approach. Proceedings of the international seminar held in the city of Stolin, Brest oblast, Belarus (15-16 November 2001): see www.cepn.asso.fr/fr/ethos/seminaire.html

Declare that

- the CORE Programme is an adequate starting point for addressing the above, with a focus on the needs of people, and to improve their lives and living conditions through a framework which enables national and international support to the communities involved;
- the experience and results obtained during the implementation of the CORE Programme should become public knowledge;
- the CORE Programme is open to other participants. The undersigned appeal to international community for wider involvement in and support for the Programme.

SECTION I
THE PROGRAMME'S OBJECTIVE

The objective of the CORE Programme is to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of selected districts by reaching out to the people themselves, helping them to contribute to formulating specific individual and common project proposals. While such participatory approaches, based on the involvement of the civil society in project activity, have been successfully used in other parts of the world, it is an innovative approach for those affected by the Chernobyl accident in Belarus to be considered as partners. This is to be achieved through the development and implementation of integrated projects in priority areas, involving local participation, as well as national and international partners, at the governmental and non-governmental level.

SECTION II
LOCATION AND TERM OF THE PROGRAMME

At first, the CORE Programme is implemented in the following four affected districts of Belarus: Bragin, Chechersk, Slavgorod and Stolin. Whenever possible, other contaminated districts will also be involved.

The CORE Programme is designed for an initial five-year period, effective after the adherence to the present Declaration by the participants. Thereafter, an independent international evaluation of the Programme will assess its results and consider further action.

SECTION III
PRIORITY AREAS

The CORE Programme integrates and co-ordinates the different dimensions of the rehabilitation of living conditions in the contaminated areas through a comprehensive set of activities focused on the following priority areas:

- *Health care and surveillance*: this part of the Programme aims to improve the health of the population through better primary health care services, health education and dynamic monitoring of the health of pregnant

women and children in the radiological context. Efforts undertaken in this direction should contribute to increase the quality and the efficacy of care for affected people in the concerned areas.

- *Economic and social development in the rural contaminated areas*: this part of the Programme aims to increase incomes through sustainable economic development based on the local populations' initiatives, particularly private producers and some already existing economic actors in the area in a context of an economy in transition; and involves the provision of technical, agricultural, radiological, marketing and financial support (e.g. micro credits and grants).
- *Culture and education of children and youth, transmission of the memory of the Chernobyl disaster*: this part of the Programme aims to develop a practical radiological culture among children and youth, raising awareness and memory of the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences for the contaminated areas and for mankind.
- *Radiological quality*: this part of the Programme aims to develop an operational and pluralistic radiological measurement system in the four districts. This system will allow the assessment and the follow-up by the people themselves and by local professionals of the "radiological quality" of their environment and their food. The existence of such an operational measurement system is a prerequisite for the implementation of the three other priorities areas.

New priority areas can be proposed by any of the participants for consideration by the Approval Board (see SECTION V), and if agreed, they will be added through a special appendix to the present Declaration.

SECTION IV
BASIC PRINCIPLES OF THE PROGRAMME

The CORE Programme is implemented according to the following principles:

1. *Integrated approach.* Sustainable rehabilitation of living conditions in the contaminated territories should be integrating all the dimensions of life quality and the participation of the local people in the design and implementation of activities. The Programme therefore implies an integrated approach, involving a set of projects in the fields of social and economic development, public health, education and culture.
2. *Voluntary participation and openness.* The participants join the Programme voluntarily by signing this Declaration. New participants in the Programme will be agreed on by the Approval Board (see SECTION V). Agreement of new participants to the Declaration will be mentioned in a special appendix. Each participant has the right to present new projects according to the priority areas. Each participant has the right to leave the Programme at any time.
3. *Practical applicability.* The main objective of the Programme is to coordinate projects and to support their implementation in order to improve the living conditions of the population of the contaminated territories.

4. *Non-profit approach.* The Programme is based on non-profit-making activities. The main portion of the funding will be allocated for strengthening the capacity of local actors to deal with the issues identified in the priority areas. This includes supporting technical and methodological partnerships of national and international institutions and NGOs.
5. *Collective decision-making.* None of the participants can play a dominant role based on territorial, financial, political, religious or other characteristics. Everyone has the right to propose a Programme-related issue for a fair and equitable discussion by the participants.
6. *Complementarity.* The Programme is complementary to the past and ongoing projects for improvement of living conditions in the contaminated areas, and by no means contradicts them.
7. *Flexibility.* The Programme activities are open to change, amendment, and expansion of their scope. The participants are ready to adjust themselves to changing conditions and to make fast collective decisions in the interests of the successful implementation of the Programme.

SECTION V
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND CO-ORDINATION

The CORE assessment, decision and coordination procedure is intended to provide the fundamental quality insurance needed for building and implementing integrated projects.

The objective is to ensure quality preparation of projects within the Programme Priority Areas; then to select the projects, and then to provide effective coordination and technical support for their implementation.

The CORE organisational structures and procedures for assessment, approval and coordination will be officially initiated within the three months following the signature of the Declaration.

The CORE organisational structures and procedures outlined in this section are without prejudice to specific rules applicable to relevant international aid programmes.

PREPARATION, ASSESSMENT, APPROVAL OF PROJECTS

Projects will be prepared, assessed and selected through a procedure involving a Co-ordination Team (CT), a Preparation and Assessment Committee (PAC) and an Approval Board (AB).

The Co-ordination Team (CT)

The CT, involving a Belarusian CORE coordinator, is supported by a representative team of national and international experts. It will:

- look for and provide support to potential local, national and international partners that could develop integrated "Topical Projects" in coordination with all participants;

- assist in identifying whether support is needed to help further develop the project, whether on technical questions, and/or in terms of facilitating the participatory process of project development;
- inform any new potential participants about the programme and deliver suitable information at a national, European, and international level.

Other functions of the CT (co-ordination) are outlined below.

The Preparation and Assessment Committee (PAC)

A formulation or preparation phase of projects will involve input from members of the PAC gathering the concerned actors (local, national and international participants of the CORE Programme) together with the Belarusian and international expertise. Once a draft project is defined, the PAC will:

- check if the proposed project fits within the priorities areas of the CORE Programme;
- check if the proposed project addresses actual local needs and concerns, and if there is a multi-stakeholder (local, national and international) approach;
- check if the necessary technical and process expertise is involved in the proposed project (according to its nature) in order to validate its viability and sustainability;
- check if the resources involved within the project will actually reach the target population and communities.

All this work will be conducted with the participant presenting the project on the basis of equal standing.

In case of positive assessment the project is proposed to the Approval Board (AB).

The Approval Board (AB)

The final decision on a project is taken by the AB, on the principle of consensus. The initial composition of the Approval Board is listed in annex 1. It can be amended by the AB, in particular, when new participants wish to join the CORE Programme. As soon as approved, a project is recognized as a part of the CORE Programme and will be suitable to integrate with the coordination structures of CORE.

Activities/projects selected and funded through a different programme (see SECTION VII) can, at any time, be submitted by sponsors to the CORE structures for assessment (PAC), approval (AB), coordination and integration (CT).

COORDINATION AND SUPPORT OF PROJECTS

The Co-ordination Team (CT) will:

- follow-up and co-ordinate the implementation of the CORE projects. Each project will involve a consortium of participants managed by a Project Co-ordinator (PC). This co-ordinator will be accountable for the implementation of the project, and reporting to the CT. If the project

is implemented within the UNDP Support Project (see below SECTION VI), the PC will also act as principal contractor;
- ensure geographical and cross-sectoral integration of the CORE projects;
- facilitate the PAC and the AB procedures (see SECTION V).

The financing and administrative support to the CORE co-ordination structures will be provided by the UNDP Programme Support Project (see SECTION VI).

SECTION VI
THE UNDP PROGRAMME SUPPORT PROJECT

Without prejudice to specific procedures applicable to relevant international aid programmes, such as the EU Cooperation Programmes, the UNDP Support Project will:

1. Provide financial, administrative and technical support to the CORE co-ordination structures for:
   - facilitating the preparation, assessment and selection of the projects (involving the PAC and AB);
   - co-ordinating the implementation of the integrated CORE Programme.
2. If so requested on a voluntary basis, administer donor resources for the Programme.
3. Support implementation of the Programme by bringing transparent, accountable and flexible procedures in the following fields: contract preparation with the operators of the projects; and follow-up of the implementation of the projects: schedules, financial management and results.
4. Help to create conditions for involvement of other affected areas of Belarus into the Programme, and linkages with similar work in other Chernobyl affected areas in Ukraine and Russian Federation.
5. Provide regular reporting as well as public information about the CORE Programme to Belarusians, Europeans and the international community.

The above is reflected in a UNDP project document, on which participants in the Programme will be consulted, and which is signed between the Government of Belarus and UNDP. If Programme participants chose, they can utilize the structure of the Support Project to delegate in a flexible, transparent and accountable way the day-to-day administrative and financial management of the project(s) to which they contribute.

Co-financers of the projects within the programme have the option of channelling their funds through the UNDP Support Project, or funding their Projects directly and using their own financial and administrative procedures.

SECTION VII
PROJECT FINANCING AND THE AUTONOMY OF CONTRIBUTING INSTITUTIONS

Each participant will consider the possibility of a contribution to the implementation of the CORE Programme. Each participant will determine and announce

the level of its possible contribution to the Programme in due course. It will remain free to select (according to its priorities) the projects it wants to fund or to co-fund and/or to determine the sharing of its contribution.

The mechanisms of possible financing are determined by the participants, depending on their preferences and/or restrictions. The financial resources are channelled:

- directly to the organizations and the persons involved in implementation of the CORE Programme and/or projects; or
- through the UNDP Programme Support Project.

Any relevant information on project implementation and outcomes (except for confidential contract-related information) should be accessible to the participants.

The provisions included in this section are without prejudice to specific procedures applicable to relevant international aid programmes, such as the EU Cooperation Programmes. Each participant is, in particular, free to follow its own selection procedure for funding or co-funding activities.

SECTION VIII
OBLIGATIONS OF THE BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES

The Belarusian authorities, represented by the Committee on the Problems of the Consequences of the Catastrophe at the Chernobyl NPP under Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus and the District Executive Committees, engage themselves to:

- assist foreign participants with free visa, customs and other procedures concerning their activity in Belarus within the framework of the Belarusian legislation;
- initiate, if necessary, the drafting and adoption of relevant legal acts of Belarus to facilitate favourable conditions for the Programme implementation (including tax exemption for cargoes and financial resources received from outside Belarus within the framework of the Programme);
- provide in-kind and financial contributions and other assistance as needed to support implementation of the Programme.

SECTION IX
EXPERT ASSESSMENT OF THE PROGRAMME

The participants commit themselves to an international independent review after the end of the five-year term of the CORE Programme, as well as a mid-term assessment after two and a half years. The review shall be based on the success criteria specified in SECTION X. The outcome shall be made public.

SECTION X
SUCCESS CRITERIA FOR THE PROGRAMME

The participants identify the following criteria to measure the success of the CORE Programme. Such criteria, as appropriate, will be integrated into the design of individual projects to help measure their success as well as that of the Programme:

- Increased living standards of the concerned populations measured in terms of progress in income, health, food quality, economic and social development, environment, education and culture;
- Entrepreneurship and social initiative developed in the concerned communities;
- A practical radiological culture developed to enable the concerned local population to better assess the radiological situation and to improve radiological quality, with respect to health, food, agriculture, and the environment;
- Access by the general public to effective, reliable, and pluralistic measures of radiological assessment;
- The level of involvement of local people, local communities and more generally Belarusian civil society in the Programme;
- An increased number and variety of projects in place meeting the objectives of the Programme in all priority areas, and reaching more people;
- An increase in the number of new participants in the Programme, whether governmental and non-governmental, and from all levels: local, national and international;
- An increase in international and national contributions to the Programme;
- An independent international review takes place within 5 years of the start of implementation assessing the need to continue the Programme and to modify or expand the priority areas;
- The CORE approach is disseminated to other contaminated districts of Belarus as well as to Ukraine and Russian Federation;
- Reliable, consistent and wide information about the Programme is made available at the local, national, European and international levels;
- The results achieved by the Programme are sustainable.

These criteria can be further refined as needed by the PAC and AB, with changes recorded in an appendix to the Declaration.

Done at Minsk this 15th day of October 2003

Mr. Vladimir G. Tsalko	Chairman of the Committee on the Problems of the Consequences of the Catastrophe at the Chernobyl NPP under the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus
Mr. Kevin McGrath	Acting UN Resident Co-ordinator / UNDP Resident Representative in Belarus
Mr. John Daniel	Deputy Director General of the UNESCO
Amb. Eberhard Heyken	Ambassador, Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk
Mr. Matthias Weingart	Country Director, Swiss Development & Co-operation Agency
Mr. Gilles Hériard Dubreuil	Chairman of the CORE Partnership Committee[2]
Mr. Joseph Mc Grath	Executive Director, Students 10K for Chernobyl, Ireland
Mr. Alexander P. Yatchenko	Chairman of the Bragin District Executive Committee
Mr. Valery V. Berestov	Chairman of the Slavgorod District Executive Committee
Mr. Alexey A. Demko	Acting Chairman of the Stolin District Executive Committee
Mr. Vassily M. Maksimenko	Chairman of the Chechersk District Executive Committee

Done at Minsk this 2nd day of December 2003:

Amb. Jonas Paslauskas	Ambassador of Lithuania
Amb. Helmut Frick	Ambassador of Germany
Amb. Norbert Jousten	Ambassador, Head of Delegation of the European Commission to Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova

[2] Collective of European NGOs and institutions constituted during the preparatory phase of the CORE programme and including the « A Tous Vents du Monde » association, Nuclear Protection Evaluation Centre (CEPN), Fertilisation pour l'Epanouissement et le Renouveau de la Terre (FERT), National Paris-Grignon Agronomic Institute (INAP-G), French Radioprotection and Nuclear Safety Institute (IRSN), Médecins du Monde, French Ministry of Agriculture, Mutadis Consultants, Patrimoine Sans Frontière, Caen University.

Amb. Stéphane Chmelewsky	Ambassador of France
Amb. Tadeusz Pawlak	Ambassador of Poland
Amb. Brian Bennett	Ambassador of the United Kingdom
Amb. Guglielmo Ardizzone	Ambassador of Italy, also in his capacity as acting Presidency of the European Union
Mr. Ales Fojtik	Chargé d'Affaires of the Czech Republic
Mr. Jan Šadek	Counsellor, Head of Sweden office in Belarus
Dr. Edmund Lengfelder	Chairman of the Board, German Association "Tchernobyl-Hilfe" in Ottobrunn
Mr. Peter Junge-Wentrup	Head of the International Educational Centre, Dortmund, Germany

Done at Minsk this 3rd day of December 2003

Mr. Jozef Machishak	Chargé d'Affaires of Slovakia

Composition of the Approval Board

Mr. Vladimir G. Tsalko, Chairman of the **Committee on the Problems of the Consequences of the Catastrophe at the Chernobyl NPP under the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus**

Ms. Cihan Sultanoglu, **UNDP** Resident Representative / **UN** Resident Coordinator in Belarus

Ms. Aicha Bah Diallo, Assistant Director-General for education of the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

Amb. Eberhard Heyken, Ambassador, Head of the **OSCE** Office in Minsk

Mr. Matthias Weingart, Country Director, **Development and Cooperation Agency of the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Swiss Confederation**

Mr. Gilles Hériard Dubreuil, Chairman of the **CORE Partnership Committee**

Mr. Joseph Mc Grath, Executive Director, **Students 10K for Chernobyl, Ireland**

Mr. Alexander P. Yatchenko, Chairman of the **Bragin District Executive Committee**

Mr. Vladimir P. Danilenko, Chairman of the **Slavgorod District Executive Committee**

Mr. Alexey A. Demko, Chairman of the **Stolin District Executive Committee**

Mr. Vassily M. Maksimenko, Chairman of the **Chechersk District Executive Committee**

Amb. Jonas Paslauskas, Ambassador of **Lithuania** in Belarus

Amb. Martin Hekker, Ambassador of **Germany** in Belarus

Amb. Steffen Skovmand, Charge d'Affaires and Interim, The Delegation of the **European Commission** to Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova

Amb. Stéphane Chmelewsky, Ambassador of **France** in Belarus

Amb. Tadeusz Pawlak, Ambassador of **Poland** in Belarus

Amb. Brian Bennett, Ambassador of **the United Kingdom** in Belarus

Amb. Guglielmo Ardizzone**,** Ambassador of **Italy** in Belarus, also in his capacity as acting Presidency of the European Union

Mr. Vladimir Ruml, Chargé d'Affaires of **the Czech Republic** in Belarus

Mr. Jan Šadek, Counsellor, Head of **Sweden** office in Belarus

Dr. Edmund Lengfelder, Chairman of the Board, **German Association "Tchernobyl-Hilfe"** in Ottobrunn

Mr. Peter Junge-Wentrup, Head of the **International Educational Centre**, Dortmund, Germany

Mr. Jozef Machishak, Chargé d'Affaires of **Slovakia** in Belarus