ECONNECT

2003 Annual Report

Econnect's Mission…

… is, through the use of information and communications technologies, to support and reinforce the activity of and co-operation among non-governmental non-profit organisations, citizens' initiatives and personalities who strive for sustainable development, respect for human rights, social justice, conservation and development of cultural values and active involvement of the public.

1.   NGO content on the Internet

The Portal of Civic Society provided by Econnect at the internet address http://www.ecn.cz/ has been enlarged with the new ambitious project during 2003. At the beginning of October, we launched in collaboration with BEZK (www.bezk.ecn.cz), Multicultural Centre Prague (www.mkc.cz) and other NGOs the **Civil Society Links Catalog - Kormidlo** (www.kormidlo.cz), a long-awaited part of our several years effort to create a complex information system on the civil sector in the Czech Republic. The project called "Kormidlo" is a first directory-type information source on the civic society sector, how it works, activities and topics of interest available on the internet in the Czech language. Geographically, it covers Czech and Slovak websites related to the civic sector, and, selectively, relevant websites in the member and candidate countries of the European Union. The novelty of the project is not only in the thematic focus, but also in the new system of distributed administration. The catalog has been divided into topical branches and editorial responsibility for particular branches was divided between 22 organizations that are prominent in terms of activities in a particular area. Each cooperated organization administers a directory of links relevant to its field of activity which can be displayed on the organization's website, and at the same in the comprehensive catalog Kormidlo. By this approach, the participated organizations are motivated to keep their topical directories updated. There were almost 5 000 entries at the end of 2003. The Catalog is daily visited by approximately 300 individual users.

The **News section** (http://zpravodajstvi.ecn.cz), where we provide daily updated information about the public sector and NGOs activities in the Czech Republic, is remaining to be our priority information activity. In comparison to year 2002, there have been significant increase of the news section readers during last year (more than 2000 visitors per day with a still growing tendency). Generally larger response to our news service by public, but also media themselves indicate that the basic changes in thematic focus, website features (as the navigation or the interactivity) and editorial work during last two years successfully reflected the information needs of our target groups. The increase in the number of readers has naturally positive impact on confidence of NGOs in Econnect, who are the main source of information for our news services. They are submitting us regularly information about their activities. According the Econnect's editors, NGOs find important mainly the open and easy accessible media space provided by Econnect: "They have learned that while their information end up in a trash bin of most other media, this is not the case with Econnect".

In 2003 we have published in the news section 702 news, 63 comments and 2252 Press releases. Last year within our thematic focus we paid attention mainly on issues concerning the public participation in political decision-making, the new legislation changes related to enviroment, the migration and the refugees status, and gender equality. Generally, the articles that gain most attention by readers contain some sort of appeal for action in the headlines or annotations (for example sign the petition). To compare with 2002 the interactivity of readers through the discussions increased significantly (115 articles have initiated online discussion). Besides the gender issues, the other topics that were discussed

by readers were war conflicts and international human rights, corporations, protection of the nature and transport.

Econnect exchanges the articles with the several Internet media provided by Czech, but also Slovak NGOs, as Feminismus.cz, Infoservis.net, Ekolist.cz or ChangeNet.sk. We've also developed new *partnerships with media* with broader thematic focus which target wider variety of readers than NGO's media. The overall aim of media partnerships and cooperations was to attract new readers, increase the impacts of NGOs activities and raise awareness among public about the role and work of NGOs in the society. In order to bridge the boundaries of the Internet, we focus mainly on cooperation with print-media. We strengthen our cooperation with „Občanské noviny" (Civil society print newspapers, Appendix of one of the main Czech Weeklists „Literarni noviny"). The representative of Econnect is a member of the editorial board and we are responsible for one of the newspapers section. A significant number of Econnect's articles have been re-published there during last year.

We also hired new chief-editor with five years experience in the media. She built the internal editorial and journalist's capacity, and strengthens the cooperation with our media partners. It was reflected in the improve of the news quality.

In the first half of the year Econnect launched new service for its readers, who can now subscribe online for the receiving of the daily or weekly digest of Econnect's news by email. 260 people have been using this service so far.

214 press releases have been submitted by more than 15 organizations through the **Press Service**, an internet tool provided by Econnect that helps the NGOs to publish theirs press releases in media. The larger users of Press Service were Environmental Law Service – EPS (49 press releases), INEX (23), Civil Society Development Foundation – NROS (19) and Greenpeace CZ (19).

During 2003 we provided *media support* to the number of NGO's campaigns and projects through our news service, mailing lists, Press Services or website hostings and development. Econnect was the media partner of Environmental Law Service in the "Farmer Jan" case, a traditional peasant whose rights have been violated by the multinational corporation NEMAK, which selected his land as an appropriate location for the construction of a heavy machinery plant.

We created a special website (bytvidet.ecn.cz), and published several articles about the competition "Byt videt" for the best NGOs websites, annual report and photo story holded by Agnes.

We also supported several other NGOs activities by providing them free access to Press Service tool, for example to Caucasus festival organized by Nesehnuti and Charita.

Besides the distribution of the information about NGO's activities to public and media, the objective of our information program is to provide NGOs' themselves with information strategy for their every day life. In 2003 322 news on issues as fundraising, legislation, NGO partnership and internal capacity building were published in **the Information Service for NGOs** (http://nno.ecn.cz). In the case of news service, the number of visitors has increased, however the increase was not very significant. The important role of the information services for NGOs could be more illustrated by the increase of the telephonic and mail requests asking for different practical information, contacts details or consultantion submited to Econnect by NGOs than by the number of visitors.

In the last year, we have prepared and published together with legislation experts *the 4 legislative cases* highlighting the laws and regulations that expose the current dubious state of democracy in the Czech Republic. The Cases also work as model projects for NGOs on the fields of advocacy and partnerships building to enhance impacts of their lobbying activity.

As a part of the **Fundraising section** there is a database of grant deadlines (http://granty.ecn.cz). In 2003 we published information about 476 fundraising opportunities for Czech NGOs. The information on grant deadlines is also weekly distributed through the mailing list Granty-l to more than 555 e-mail addresses (it's 300 more subscribers than in the year 2003).

Joblist (http://prace.ecn.cz) is another popular space used by NGOs. In 2003 more than 619 jobs offers have been published there, which is two times more than in 2002. Selected advertismetns are also published weekly in Občanské noviny (Appendix of Literarni noviny weekly). Among NGOs, that use this space regularly, are small as well as large well-know organization (as People in Need, Sananim or Information Centre of UN). During the last year the joblist went through reconstruction. Thanks to that the job-seekers can search jobs offers by form of work (permanent, part time, volunteers and civil services), region and overall organization focus (e.g. human rights promotion, ecology, social and helth services).

In June 2003 the new discussion mailing lists **Darcovstvi-l** focusing on issues of donorship was set up in cooperation with VIA Foundation. Since its launch more than 99 representatives of NGOs have actively participated in live discussions related to the various issues as tax assignation, ethics of donorships and the social responsibility of corporation and private companies. The mailing list also provides a useful feedback from NGOs on activities of organizations, which actively develop the environment for donorships in Czech Republic, like in the case of legislative change enabling tax assignations prepared by Donors Forum.

Calendar of Events assisted to promote almost 3000 events organized by various NGOs around the country. The Calendar keeps very good rate of visits (currently between 4000 and 4500 monthly). As last year 5 – 10 events are weekly selected in the Calendar to be published in the Občanské noviny newspaper, through which they are promoted to broader public. According to the Calendar's editor the number of organizations who are actively posting the announcements about their activities in the Calendar has increased remarkably.

As in the previous years, Econnect selected one crucial current topic for the year 2003 on which to create a new Thematic Portal for Czech audiences. June saw the launch of information portal **"Civil Society - The Citizen's Handbook to Citizens' Rights"** (www.obcan.ecn.cz) (further called "Občan"), which intended to serve as a "civic defense" guide for those who feel their rights are not being respected by government officials or big business. The website, which was accepted very positively by public (currently we receive approximately 200 visits a day), features very practical guidelines showing what every Czech citizen can do if he/she disagrees with a public administrator's decision or if he/she wants to take active part in decision-making themselves, such as guidelines on how to organize demonstrations, get in contact with officials, or how to establish NGO or a political party. The essential part of the portal is an information on equal opportunities for both genders, since women are traditionally underrepresented in all levels of decision-making. The Portal is a joint effort of several organizations, where Econnect successfully took charge of overall coordination thanks to its media, technical, networking and web-development experiences, which have been crucial for the success of the website. The website is linking the know-how of organizations (EPS, Ateliér pro životní prostředí, BEZK, NESEHNUTI, Gender Studies, o.p.s., Aperio and others), who undertake different

activities to defend rights of citizens and to enhance public participation in decision-making on political level. The website not only promotes the work of this NGOs, but also assists them to down-scale the amount of daily phone's or e-mail's requests submitted to them by the citizens, since they can now refer them to the regularly updated information on www.obcan.ecn.cz. According to the project's team, the most important output of the portal is the raised awareness of public about their citizen's rights, and the establishment of the number of the new NGO.

Besides the already mentioned distribution lists *Granty-l* and newly set-up discussion list *Darcovstvi-l,* Econnect has been administrating **five other mailinglists:** *Gender-l* (110 members), *Regions*-l (190 members) and *Rozvoj-l* (190 members), which aims to strengthen the networking and information sharing among NGOs, as well as individual activists.

Indeed we have assisted the development of numerous other websites of other NGOs and individuals (for example to Union ROSKA, which assists people with multiple sclerosis; Gender Studies, o.p.s. or the 3rd medical clinic of Charles University, which runs the project targeting people who are in charge of looking after the long-term ill or disabled relatives at home), who are struggling with lack of know-how, skills and in many cases also resources. Our role in those projects can be illustrated on the example of the newly relaunched web portal dedicated to Kurdish culture and politics. Our initial motivation was the prospect that Petr Kubalek - an expert in Kurdish studies in the Czech Republic - voluntarily provided us with the material on the subject that is scarcely mentioned on the web, and was definitely not available online in Czech. To make this information publicly accessible, Econnect has developed website kurdove.ecn.cz for free. The website is being updated 1-2 times a year, in a close collaboration with Mr. Kubalek.

2. Development and implementation of new technologies

In 2003, Econnect has continued to provide and further develop a wide range of technical solutions and tools to many Czech NGOs. New clients have subscribed to a various services, mainly those related to WWW presence (webhosting) and electronic communication (mailing lists).

The most popular services are:

Webdesign and webhosting - In terms of webdesign, our team, which consist of 1 internal and one external designer and several programmers, is delivering professional and complex solutions for the web presence of the NGO. Starting with the detailed analysis of the initial brief, development and implementation of the web site structure, hierarchy and navigation systems, it goes through a production phase where we focus on a great look and a fast technical implementation, and ends with the hosting on the regularly backed up and constantly monitored server, which offers an excellent local and international connectivity with no implicit band with limits. We are care of a long term sustainability of the client's website and respond to the demand to lower the cost of the future website updates, which is why we emphasize the use of publication tools and where suitable other open solutions, i. e. those that give the NGO enough information about the used technology, allow them to make their own choice and don't make them dependent on one proprietary solution.

During 2003, we have produced about 17 complex web presentations and 2 internal projects (Kormidlo and Občan). One of our recent projects, Hra o Zemi, has been awarded "The best NGO web presentation" by Agnes o.p.s in 2003 (see Bytvidet.ecn.cz).

For other references on projects finished in the course of the year 2003, have a look at:
"O nás, s námi" – sustainable development (http://udrzitelnyrozvoj.ecn.cz/)
"Migrace online" – for Multikulturní centrum Praha - (http://www.migraceonline.cz)
"Obec Konzultantu" – for Nadace Via - (http://nadacevia.cz/obeckonzultantu/)
"Feminismus CZ" – for Gender Studies, o.p.s. (http://www.feminismus.cz)
"Pečující online" – (http://www.pecujici.cz)
Greenpeace CZ – (http://www.greennpeace.cz)

IT helpdesk & support – Econnect has been providing hotline for technical support and the on site support NGOs. Regular service for several Prague NGOs includes regular visits, installation and maintenance of common software packages, hardware troubleshooting, technical advisory, development and implementation of suitable and low cost backup strategy etc. To many others we have provided a qualified telephone support on wide variety of problems, as well as on site visits when necessary.

Mailing lists - Traditionally, one of the most popular services that Econnect provides is mailing list – a tool that allows an easy distribution of email to many subscribers, as well as a communication of a dislocated members of a workgroup. In 2003 we have started using a new open source software that has many new features, like web based administration interface, creation of the online searchable archives and much more. We are in the process of transforming all the existing mailing lists we host to this new technology.

APC ActionApps (http://www.actionaps.org) – open source content management and web publishing system developed mainly by Econnect together with several other developers from around the world. We use this solution for many dynamic websites of Czech NGOs, but the tool itself is being used worldwide, now in more than 1000 instances. We continue working on the core development of the system (ensuring security, reliability and stability as well as bug fixes) as well as we keep adding new features.

During the year of 2003, we have implemented APC ActionApps publication systems to the web presentations of 23 Czech NGOs. We have also build two ECN project's web sites (http://www.kormidlo.cz and http://obcan.ecn.cz) using this tool.

Providing complex services

More and more increasingly we encounter the demand from NGOs for a complex internet solutions, including the detailed analysis of the information needs, workflow, the need for the online collaboration, followed by the implementation, setup and customization of necessary services and ongoing technical support and maintenance. Two of the projects we were working on in the last year are worth mentioning in this regard:

TSP (http://www.tspweb.cz) - the online space for street/terrain social workers that focuses on the promotion and propagation of the social work in the Czech Republic. The project has been initiated and funded by Roma center in Brno. The leading idea of the project is to create the online virtual clearinghouse on the subject of the terrain social work, in the situation when setting up a physical space would be very difficult. Econnect has provided consultancy services, press service tool, domain registration and hosting, web hosting, APC ActionApps implementation, PR and a submission onto web search engines and directories.

Another example of the trend mentioned above could be the project called "Doma v ČR" – imitated by IOM (International Organization for Migration). The aim of the project is to provide the foreigners living in the Czech Republic with the information in their own language. Econnect has provided a detailed information analysis, technical realization including web design, publication system customization (we have added support for less

common languages like Vietnamese, Armenian and others) and also provided a physical space equipped with 3 computers, Internet connectivity and technical support for a native speakers to work on the content of the website. More information about the project can be found at http://domavcr.cz/owebu.shtml.

Other technical projects

In parallel with the project driven technical work, Econnect technical team also constantly works on the improvement and development of all our technical equipment and services. In 2003, we have purchased new pieces of hardware to increase the availability and reliability of the system as a whole, improved both data and connectivity backup capacity. We constantly monitor all our services via remote alerts system we have in place.
We have also improved our tools for antiviral and antispam protection, which helps our users to work more efficiently and not waste their capacity on fighting email virus epidemics or vaste their resources on getting a rid of unsolicited email.
Many other improvements were implemented on various other services, including the full text search engine, the tool for online petitions, domain registration (this year we had to transfer all our domains to another registrar).

3. International cooperation

Also in 2003, the most intensive co-operation was inspired primarily by our membership in the association APC. Econnect actively participates in several APC programs: ***APC Action Application*** (tools for building collaborative publishing applications), ***Learning and Practitioners Network - APC Content Exchange*** (ACE) and ***APC Women's Network Support Program*** (APC WNSP, the Econnect's staff member is one of the regional coordinators for CEE).

As in the previous years we took a leading role in the further development of a database tool for building collaborative publishing applications - APC AA, as well as in providing supports to other APC members, who use APC AA.
We have provided a technical assistance with the implementation of APC ActionApps into the APC Africa Internet Rights website (http://africa.rights.apc.org/) and APC Africa WSIS (http://www.wsis-cs.org/africa/) portal.

Econnect has taken an active part in the APC Content Exchange Project ACE and Econnect's staff member is project coordinator. The project connects APC members form dozens of countries. It aims to enable the participants to distribute locally produced news among their partner organizations who republish it on their pages. That way, issues relevant to particular regions and information about inspiring projects receive promotion among readers in other parts of the world (the project output can be see at http://www.apc.org/english/news/rss/index.shtml).

Close cooperation continues with the Slovak APC member ChangeNet. We have regular exchange of news, and provide them with a technical support.

In November 2003, two representatives of Econnect participated in APC Council Meeting in Cartagena, Columbia.

4. Training

During 2003 year we have organized several trainings for individual NGOs (for example Gender Studies, o.p.s., Pratele prirody, Ustav pro ekopolitiku, or the editors team of the project "Home in Czech Republic") in the use of the APC ActionApps publication system.

During the year we conducted one workshop (20 participants) and 11 individual's trainings in the Internet searching, information catalogization, methodology of information gathering and the maintenance of the links database for representatives of NGOs cooperating on the Catalog of References in Civic Society.

Two small trainings have been organized for 7 volunteers involved in the project Dobrovolnik.cz. They were trained in the editing and the publication of information on the Internet.

The number of e-mail's, telephone's as well as personal consultations has been provided free charge to our users and partners.