



MAMA-86

Establishing the Connection Between Environmental and Health Issues and Making Them Everyone's Business

BY BARBARA A. GABRIEL

Anna Golubovska-Onisimova looks like a mother. One can easily imagine the kind smile and casual grace that she brings to professional settings befitting a loving mother of two small children. But Onisimova is changing the popular perception of mothers in her country as women whose concerns are strictly confined to the domestic realm. Onisimova is the savvy director of MAMA-86, a women's environmental NGO in Ukraine that is changing the face of national and local environmental policies by helping put them into the hands of the citizens whom they most affect. When Onisimova addresses a room, people listen. As she describes the state of environmental decay plaguing her home country of Ukraine and the devastating consequences being wrought upon the health of its citizens, her voice commands attention. And that attention is bearing fruit in the form of a radically new way of approaching and seeing environmental concerns in Ukraine.

This article looks at how a group of women joined together to find answers to the questions concerning the health and well-being of their children and brought about sound environmental policies that improved quality-of-life issues for citizens in their country. It also looks at how these women have drawn public attention to issues such as pollution and water quality by involving the media and other public relations techniques in their battle for positive change.

What's in a Name?

The story of MAMA-86 lies within its name. When the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster struck in 1986, the devastating effect on the environment, and, consequently, peoples' health, was overwhelming. The long-term consequences that would continue to manifest themselves in future generations

were beyond the imaginations of those suffering from the initial disaster. But soon afterward, a rapid increase in thyroid complications, particularly among small children alive during the disaster or born shortly after, raised obvious suspicions about their cause. Mothers of children diagnosed with thyroid cancer knew in their hearts what to attribute it to—but bore the burden of having to “prove it.” “Children born from 1985 to 1987 were the most affected,” says Onisimova. “In

time, studies showed significant evidence of ionizing radiation exposure in parts of Ukraine when the wind direction changed a few days after the Chernobyl meltdown. Statistics showed that thyroid cancer cases were developing at a faster rate than other diseases. Although many people recognized Chernobyl as the culprit, it took a while to be officially recognized as such by the Ukrainian government.”

“Even in 1990, there was almost no information available in our country on what had happened with Chernobyl or how peoples' health was continuing to be affected,” says Onisimova. It was in that year that a group of educated, concerned, and independent-minded mothers—many of whom had children affected by Chernobyl—joined Onisimova to establish MAMA-86. Onisimova's new NGO was among several others that persuaded the Ukrainian government to officially recognize the major health complications in Kiev to be a result of Chernobyl, thus paving the way for state funding for medical treatment. “Getting the state to recognize this was a major accomplishment,” says Onisimova. “In this case, support came more quickly because of the overwhelming evidence provided by scientists and the political pressure exerted by the situation.”

But not all of MAMA-86's battles have been won as easily. Since its origins as an infant NGO run by a small group of dedicated female leaders, MAMA-86 has grown to take on some of the most daunting of Ukraine's environmental challenges: clean air, clean water, women's health, women's leadership in environmental policy-making, and its current foremost initiative: helping form national environmental health action plans by incorporating the input of a cross-section of Ukrainian society.

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Identifying Key Issues

“There is quite a lot of resistance to a movement with a name like MAMA-86,” says Onisimova with a smile. But bringing



Logos (above) and logo types (see MAMA-86 in article title) are a simple public relations technique and play an important role in establishing recognition among the public and cohesion within an organization. Their use lets people know that a specific project or educational piece is sponsored by a specific group, drawing attention to both the issue and the organization.

women—particularly mothers—into the environmental arena in a country that has little tradition of sharing information about environmental risks and consequences with its population has surprisingly met with large success. Over the past 10 years, MAMA-86 has grown to lead a large number of comprehensive public health initiatives. The group has generated significant resources, all procured by their own fund-raising efforts. In the beginning, they provided medical assistance to the children and mothers affected by the Chernobyl disaster. By 1993, they had opened an independent medical laboratory to examine children in Ukraine and respond to their health needs. They have arranged environmental education programs for preschoolers and young schoolchildren as well as workshops for adults that teach environmentally sound methods of production and consumption.

Through its work, MAMA-86 has gained credibility for its idea that addressing important environmental issues and involving women in decision-making processes is crucial to the goal of gender equality. After the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, MAMA-86 and other Ukrainian women's NGOs launched the "Monitoring After Beijing" program, which identified the most urgent concerns facing women in Ukraine to be environmental issues, healthcare, and poverty. The program analyzed changes in the status of Ukrainian women in recent years and worked to help fulfill the obligations that the Ukrainian government assumed when it signed the "Platform for Action"—a major outcome of the Beijing conference that outlined specific areas where improvement in the status of women is crucial to their health and quality of life.

Addressing Water Quality Concerns

Work on this initiative led to more specific targets and goals in the environmental arena. At a consultation meeting including MAMA-86 and other NGOs in April 1997, drinking water quality was identified as a key issue requiring immediate and comprehensive action. The result was a national campaign on drinking water in which MAMA-86 undertook independent research and analysis of drinking water quality and measured public perceptions about water quality and uses. Results included the conclusion that more than 45 percent of Ukraine's population is consuming water below the national quality standard. Additional concerns such as the declining state of water treatment facilities and equipment and the threat posed by poor sewage and waste disposal complicates the problem. "For example," says Onisimova, "there is a huge stockpile of pesticides leaking into underground pipelines, which are in a terrible state



Photo courtesy of MAMA-86.

Reporters at a local television station interview a regional leader of MAMA-86 during the International Fair of Machines and Equipment for Waterworks and Sewage Systems in Odessa, September 1998.

of disrepair. There is no existing database of where all of these stockpiles are located and what their quantities are. Many of them are stored in absolutely unsafe conditions, and there is currently no policing of them. As a result, people are facing potential poisoning every day."

MAMA-86 has sought to raise public awareness about water safety. Seminars that have provided the opportunity for water experts and major stakeholder groups in Ukraine to meet have been set up by MAMA-86 in an effort to provide a multi-sectoral debate on water quality issues. Representatives from water supply and regulation authorities have been invited to hear the results of MAMA-86's independent research, and discussions have involved representatives from Ukraine's business, industry, academic, and media sectors. These meetings have given many NGOs and business leaders the opportunity to meet their government representatives for the first time. Such activities have led to the identification of a wide spectrum of concrete objectives. These objectives will be followed up by campaigns to build public



Courtesy of MAMA-86.

In addition to organization logos, compelling visuals that relate to a specific program, such as this MAMA-86 national project "Eco-telephone" logo, bring attention to specific causes and issues. "Eco-telephone" is a service that allows citizens to call in and ask questions or voice concerns about environmental issues. Eighty to 100 people make use of the service each month.



awareness about the problem; educate the public about the relational aspect between quality drinking water and their health; engage a cross-section of Ukrainian society in debates about how to systematically improve the water supply system; and lobby national and local governments for action. According to Onisimova, the climax of the campaign will be several public hearings organized by MAMA-86 in Kiev and Ukraine's other regions this year, in which legislators and experts will answer citizens' questions about water quality and its effect on public health.

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Pioneering a Model of Democratic Participation and Consensus Building

Major campaigns such as the one addressing Ukraine's drinking water have helped prepare MAMA-86 for its most ambitious project yet—a project that captures its principal mission of putting environmental policy into the hands of Ukrainian citizens who too often have been kept in the dark about the issues that most affect their health and quality of life. “Public policy and access to information are

increasingly recognized as essential elements in making the much-needed transition toward environmentally sound, health-enhancing, and sustainable forms of development,” writes Onisimova in the introduction to one of the many public documents produced by MAMA-86. In an unprecedented event in Ukraine in late 1998, MAMA-86 led a group of other NGOs in obtaining comprehensive public input on the National Environmental Health Action Plan (NEHAP), the first such document in Ukraine to be subject to public discussion and debate at the drafting stage.

Onisimova gives a good argument as to why the creation of a NEHAP is crucial to MAMA-86's goal of a democratic society that has a voice in the important issues that affect everyday life. By developing broad multi-sectoral negotiations that include the participation of government officials as well as local authorities, NGOs, scientists, community groups, trade unions, business leaders, and members of the general public, MAMA-86 is pioneering a method of consensus-building that is still rare in many countries in the NIS that are unaccustomed

to democratic decision-making processes. NEHAPs are the methods by which nations independently implement the statutes of the Aarhus Convention, a regional framework for strengthening public rights of access to information, decision-making, and justice in the context of environmental concerns. (The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, known as the Aarhus Convention, was adopted at the 4th Ministerial Conference “Environment for Europe” in Aarhus, Denmark. Thirty-nine countries and the European Community have since signed it.) Onisimova points out that the work of NGOs is essential in implementing the Aarhus Convention, which is often unfamiliar to government officials unaccustomed to the concept of citizens' rights. It is Onisimova's hope that MAMA-86's role in helping write the content of the NEHAP and several LEHAPs (Local Environmental Health Action Plans) will pave the way for prompt citizen and governmental action on the most pressing of Ukraine's environmental concerns.

The success of MAMA-86 and sister NGOs in writing chapter drafts and lobbying for their inclusion in the final NEHAP has been tremendous. Eight chapters authored by MAMA-86 have thus far been accepted with mostly minor revisions into the final version of Ukraine's NEHAP. These include chapters on air quality; water quality; food safety; wastes; the energy sector; mechanisms of implementation; public participation; nuclear safety (including a summary of past and ongoing public health consequences from Chernobyl); and information for population and public awareness raising on environmental health. These chapters comprise the result of a comprehensive information-gathering strategy pioneered by MAMA-86.

The effort began in May 1998, when MAMA-86 contacted the



A public hearing on health and environment issues with experts and officials of Parliament and the Ministries participating in Kiev, June 1998.

Photo courtesy of MAMA-86.



A press conference was held at the National News Agency (UNIAN) after the final seminar on public consultations on the National Environment and Health Action Plan of Ukraine, February 1999.

national coordinator of the NEHAP and offered its assistance in the first phase of the project: compiling a report that described current health and environmental situations in Ukraine. MAMA-86 submitted an entire draft of this report, which was accepted with minor revisions. From there, MAMA-86 continued to draft other chapters, compiled with the assistance of a public consultation process held throughout Ukraine. With the help of other NGOs, this process included publishing invitations to public forums in national and regional newspapers in which all interested parties were invited to participate. Seminars were held in different regions and incorporated citizens, national and community leaders, and experts in the topical areas under discussion. This public consultation process garnered much interest and coverage by Ukraine's mass media, which have been educated by MAMA-86 about its project with videos, press conferences, and printed materials. The result at the end of the first three months was drafts of several chapters chosen by MAMA-86 for their importance in environmental safety. They incorporated more than 700 comments compiled by the consultation process. These chapters then entered the NEHAP coordinators' review stage, in which editorial changes were discussed with MAMA-86 and subsequently accepted with minor revisions.

Among the many results of this process have been Ukrainian citizens' increased interest in a democratic system of implementing health and environmental policies and the determination of other NGOs to hold their own consultative processes for policy-making issues. Another result is an overwhelming response from local groups in regions where the consultations took place. Several of these groups are now involved in dialogues with local authorities on the drafting of LEHAPs. "Democratization and transparency are clearly recognized as fundamental requirements in implementing the NEHAP," concludes Onisimova in a final project report. MAMA-86 has

vowed to follow up its work on the NEHAP by helping with the practical application of the changes outlined in the final report.

Clearly, MAMA-86 has made great strides in its complementary missions of improving environmental health, getting women involved in key environmental policy efforts, and introducing the concept of democracy into the policy-making process. "MAMA-86 is my life now," Onisimova says proudly. "We have developed very much over the years, getting involved in many different projects." Involving women—particularly mothers—in its pioneering work, MAMA-86 is challenging numerous stereotypes about where a woman's sphere of influence should end. According to Onisimova, this is best accomplished by simply giving women the opportunity to make change and letting the results speak for themselves. "This is how we are promoting women's rights," she says. "If you start shouting too loudly, 'I'm a mother! I have rights!' you will soon meet with resistance." Onisimova says that MAMA-86's leadership and democratization tactics are helping improve the lives of women—Ukraine's principal caregivers—and subsequently the lives of their children. The name of Onisimova's female-run NGO is proof that a positive legacy can result from the most tragic of environmental disasters if we only take time to learn the lessons they can teach us.

More information on MAMA-86 can be found at the organization's Web site (English language: www.mama-86.kiev.ua/eng/index.htm; Russian language: www.mama-86.kiev.ua/rus/index.htm). The site details the NGO's goals and accomplishments; introduces staff members; and highlights core activities such as the "Drinking Water in Ukraine" project, environmental health and safety education programs, and free medical diagnostic services for children. Many of the organization's reports and publications can be electronically accessed and the site also offers links to other groups that focus on issues concerning the environment and the health and well-being of people—particularly women and children.

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