



WECF | Women in Europe for a Common Future

“It is important to work at the community level as I am sceptical the high level people will change something”

Interview with Elina Doszhanova of the Social Ecological Fund

Elina Doszhanova (31) is from Almaty, Kazakhstan and the executive director of the organisation Social Ecological Fund. She attended the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference Of the Parties (COP) 19 in Warsaw. Claire Greensfelder, senior Advisor on Climate and Energy for WECF, interviewed her on her organisation and the importance of the being present at the UNFCCC.

How did you become involved with the Social Ecological Fund?

“I worked for international organisations, banks and local businesses, but with two kids and a family I could not devote as much time as needed to work in such a competitive environment. Then I got reconnected with Kaisha, who is a prominent environmental leader and ecologist in Kazakhstan and also my friend and I started working with her new organisation, the Social Ecological Fund. That was back in 2008 after she received the Goldman Environmental Prize. In 2012 I was appointed as the Executive Director of Social Ecological Fund. The work of the organisation is project based and is part of a larger network, the EcoForum NGO Network of Kazakhstan.

Beside myself, there are three staff members, namely technical support, a finance staff member and a project assistant. We also enjoy a good network of experts who work with us on different programmes. Much of what we do now in our organisation is to develop and build the capacity of the EcoForum NGO network, especially in the area of climate change and sustainable energy. I was recently elected as the Secretary of the Coordination Council of the National Network of the EcoForum. There are now 80 groups involved in the EcoForum.

In Kazakhstan we are working with the government and the civil society to help promote sustainable energy and climate change issues. We also have had some programmes with

our partners on chemical safety and environmental monitoring at the community level. We try to also work with educational institutions in Kazakhstan and engage in educational activities, for instance, our newest involvement is with the Global Hibakusha Project to promote the understanding and remembrance of things that happened during the cold war and the history of nuclear testing and its consequences.”

You said you have worked for international organisations before joining the Social Ecological Fund. Were these organisations environmental groups?

“When I was 22 years old and in my last year of university doing a major in finance and business administration, I was influenced by some environmental leaders. I had taken a part-time job where I met the wonderful people who changed the path I was on. These people were Fran Macy and Enid Schreibman from California and they were conducting a women’s leadership and women’s rights training and they deeply influenced me. They had been working in post-Soviet countries since 1985 teaching environmental leadership and deep ecology. They were focusing on providing women capacity building training. I helped out in workshop that they were conducting in Shymkent and Taraz when I met them. At that time they were also working on a proposal for the United States State Department to do a 3-year training project in Kazakhstan called “Democracy in Action”. They asked me if I could come and work with them in Berkeley on that project. So, I moved to Berkeley California to do a 2 year internship programme in their organisation.”

Was it important for you to take part in the UNFCCC here in Warsaw?

“Definitely yes. It was important because each time I participate in these international forums I learn more about the mechanics of the actual negotiation process and I also meet new people so I can expand my network. This time it was great to meet more active women participating in the WECF Leadership Training programme. It is also a great opportunity to do networking and planning of joint work together with other NGOS, especially since I represent not just my organisation but also the entire EcoForum network of Kazakhstan.

Also, Kazakhstan has already made a commitment for climate change, namely Greenhouse Gas reductions. They promote the green economy strategy so being here as an observer is an opportunity to really see what they are doing here at the international level and to compare that with what they are doing at the home level.

WECF has always been supporting me and my colleagues to attend international conferences, and this time it was here in Warsaw. It is helpful to be at the UNFCCC, because climate is a priority area for our organisation and our network’s working group on climate. I am quite sceptical that this high level people will really bring a positive change concerning the future of our planet. That is why it is so important for us to push for changes towards the low carbon development path and having less fossil fuel at our community level. That we walked out at the COP19 in protest of the lack of action being taken by the governments was the best thing on the trip. I had never experienced anything like this. Making a decision to walk out was one that I had never faced before. That was something new and different.”

How was it to work with WECF in their leadership programme?

“I think that what WECF is doing now is very good. We are just starting to get more active on the project and for me it is great to have WECF as a partner we can rely on. The people at WECF provide a very supportive environment and it is always a pleasure to work with them. We really work together as one team; it is a win-win partnership for everyone participating!

What was good about the training was that I got to meet new people from other regions of the world and heard their stories. It is always interesting for me to hear what people are doing in other countries on the ground and to meet other women like me who often share the same challenges and the same views. We also learned about the ways how women can build their leadership and engage with local activities including the local government. We have been given the international context and instruments promoting equal rights of women. And during the training we had great speakers, like women leaders as Farah Kabir and Eva Quistorp. They have achieved a lot and we need to be sure that we learn from what they have done, carrying the torch to the next one.

What could have been better? When it comes to thinking about leadership, I really like to see and learn more about myself. So some kind of assessment or self-assessment of our leadership qualities would be good to add to the training, to see where you stand compared to other people and possibly get some tips to develop your own skills.

When I go home to Almaty I will think about how to continue with the next part of the leadership training programme. I will consult with my colleagues from other NGOs on how to select four women and become a mentor for them. However, I know exactly what I am going to do with them. We will go to meetings together and probably organise a conference. For me, it can be difficult to be a mentor since the women I will be training are all older than me, so I am also going to recruit some older people.”
