

Are current state funds allocated to environmental protection in Albania sufficient?

On November 19, 2008, Macedonia took a day off to plant 6 million trees in the areas burned by the forest fires of 2007 and called other neighboring countries in the Balkans to follow the example and plant millions of trees in the region. This initiative was named “Day of the Tree—Plant your future”, a plan that aims to reforest 35 000 hectares that were devastated by fires in 2007 and raise the environmental awareness of its citizens. The event brought together hundreds of thousands of citizens who planted 6 million trees in a single day.

In light of this example, let’s ask what is being done in Albania to restore the burned forests? According to the Ministry of Environment of Albania, there were 780 hectares reforested between within the period of 2005-2007, and 1 million trees planted during 2008. The area that Albania reforested in 3 years is much smaller than the area that the Macedonian volunteers reforested in one single day.

Public investments in the environmental sustainability in Albania are minimal: expenditures allocated to the environment in the state budget of 2009 constitute only 0.2 % of the national GDP, a low proportion compared to average public investments on environmental issues in the EU countries. According to Eurostat (The Statistical Office of the European Communities), the average public investments in the environment of the 10 new countries that joined the EU in 2004 was around 0.61 % of their GDP. Bulgaria, a Balkan country, invested 0.75 % of its GDP in the environment in 2004. Compared to these figures, 0.2 % of the GDP that is spent on the environment is a negligible investment if we consider that Albania is aiming to become a candidate country to join the EU. The Albania 2008 Progress Report compiled by the European Commission points out that “development and use of the other renewable energy sources remains at an early stage” (p. 41).

Why should we increase investments in the environment?

There are a number of reasons why Albania should invest more in the environment.

First of all, environmental protection and investments have been minimal during the communist regime, as well as during the transition period. While throughout communism, it was the heavy industry that degraded much of the environment, during the transition period, weak implementation of laws resulted in the destruction of entire forests and pollution by the citizens themselves, who had almost nonexistent environmental awareness. Albania’s progress in the field of environmental protection has been slow and minimal as indicated in the EC Albania 2008 Progress Report (p. 37-38). At least minimal progress in the field of environmental sustainability should be achieved in light of a possible candidacy to join the EU. The European Commission Staff in Albania points out that the implementation and enforcement of environmental legislation is still lagging behind and the preparations in the field of environment are advancing slowly (ibid).

Second, it should be realized that planting trees in urban and suburban areas will bring benefits for the people living there. According to a study conducted by researchers Dr Richard Mitchell from Glasgow University, and Dr Frank Popham from St Andrews University, a greater percentage of greenery in the urban areas was associated with better health. More greenery improves the citizens’ health by 50%. The correlation between greenery and the decrease in number of diseases has been observed also in another study in the Netherlands conducted by J. Maas et al.

By investing in the expansion of green areas we will invest also in the public health as shown by the above studies. It is known that trees and plants in general are crucial for the quality of air in the cities. The air is a public good that belongs to all people—a poor quality of air affects all of us. That is why Albania needs to invest more in reforestation and trees in the cities and towns, which would eventually lower health expenditures; we should not be content with just some hundreds hectares of trees planted.

Third, investments in environmental protection are simultaneously investments in the economy. The destruction of a forest for lumber or of a mountain for construction materials may seem like profit but the actual costs and economic damage not shown in the balance sheet are much larger than short-term monetary profits perceived by people.

The loss of oxygen that the trees produce, erosion of the soil, the diminishing of water resources that the mountains and forests contain, the loss of biodiversity (several plants that we are not familiar with at the moment, could be potentially used to make drugs to fight diseases), loss of carbon sequestering ability and the ability of the ecosystems to filter the air and water, etc., are costs that are never declared but that in fact incur and constitute as real financial costs.

The financial costs incurred by the loss of natural capital have been calculated in an EU-commissioned study. This study finds that the price of annual forest loss is between \$2 trillion and \$5 trillion—the cost of natural decline dwarfs losses on the financial markets. Investments in renewable energy in Albania should not only be viewed as obligations to meet the wishes of environmentalists and EU requirements, but should rather be seen as strategic investments in a sustainable future in the brink of an increase of temperatures resulting from global warming where hydro power cannot be seen as a reliable source of energy anymore. Energy security means security for businesses and ensures economic growth in Albania—that is why more investments are needed in this field.

In mid-November, President-elect Obama made an important statement regarding the environment, declaring that environment will be a priority in his economic plan to save the USA from financial crisis. Obama announced that he will create 2.5 million new green jobs in the field of renewable energy.

Albania should learn from other countries and not lag behind in ensuring environmental protection and sustainability; state investments in this field should be increased and environmental issues should be taken seriously by the public, as this is a matter that affects everyone, regardless their political affiliation, ethnicity or religion—we should act before it is too late.

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