



Biological observation

URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT IN ALBANIA

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SYNOPSIS

Key words:

Environment,
integrated planning,
management,
urbanization.

The study aims to highlight the needs of urban management based on the construction of an approach that responds to the specific environment, social, economic, and institutional aspects of the cities. The study is focused on integrated planning and management of environment of the urban features, which tend to co-exist within the cities. Research data indicate the ways how to improve these issues and provides answers to the following questions: Why is environmental planning and its management important? What are the effects of the environment in urban areas? What is their role in the improvement of quality of life? How do people think of urban plan and the environment?

The study is based on the analysis of questionnaires about perception and beliefs on such issues.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 19th century people thought of environment as the natural beauty of the earth that was disappeared, and now many people around the world have awoken to the realities of just how fragile our earth actually is. The livelihoods of some of its dwellers live on natural resources such as land for food, water and fuel, which is often overexploited. This rapid growth in Albania had its consequential effects on the communities, and the community values, which are associated with many urban environmental problems; some of which are linked to the lack of coordination and cooperation between strategies for agricultural and urban development.

The Albanian new urbanization resulted in enormous pressure for shelter and services and as a matter of fact, the study points out that the urban environment is under stress, with high levels of pollution, rising automobile emissions, large

amounts of untreated municipal wastewater, and increasing solid waste management problems. These problems of urbanization are not going unnoticed, but they are inevitably linked with modern development, and as such, they are viewed by many as a necessary burden to carry and as the process of urban population growth the study highlights it in terms of natural increase of population and rural-urban migration and city annexation into surrounding rural areas. As much as the opportunities offered by these new urban regions, they simultaneously present urban management challenges such as housing shortages, inadequate infrastructures, poor urban quality of life. Rural-urban migration is expected to continue as more people move to urban areas in search of economic opportunity which is characterized by flows of produce, finance, labor and services and by processes of rapid economic, sociological, institutional and environmental change. The constantly expanding new urban areas offer far more choices than other spaces as the population here has a foot in both the rural and urban areas that all result in a better quality of life for the poorest members of the society (Bronwen, 2006). Urban city or mega city like Tirana, the capital of Albania, Durrës and the main important port in our country have been "*the victims*" of urbanization; because they offer a great number of competitive advantages such as higher wages, education, health care, and social cultural attractions, that all resulted in a better quality of life for the poorest members of the society. "While mega-cities offer opportunities for an improved quality of life for residents and economic growth for countries, they simultaneously present massive urban management challenges." (Bronwen, 2006).

In fact, some consider urbanization of these mega cities as an indicator for a scientific approach to human life, away from the rigid framework of traditional beliefs and customs; 95% of the dwellers in the study consider the mega cities as the ideal place to live an independent life, offering enormous freedom to liberate their minds.

The government has been assigning increasingly large amounts of development spending to manage some of these problems. It is considered as very important by political and governance structures in most jurisdictions, to support sustainable planning measures before they can affect institutions and regions. The students consider challenges of urban environmental difficult because of: (1) the complexity of the problems, (2) a great number of institutions influencing the nature of development, and (3) the rapid rate of urban growth.

Planners can help manage the growth of cities, applying tools like zoning and growth management to manage the environment and the uses of land. The forces and processes that constitute "urban activity" have far-reaching and long-term effects not only on its immediate boundaries, but also on the entire region in which it is positioned. Instead, it needs to be based on the construction of an approach that responds to the specific environment, social, economic and institutional aspects of the urban interface (White,1994). In this study, it is also considered as a result the actual implementation which is based on a complex compromise.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to point out the larger picture of intertwining relationships between natural, political, economic and social systems that shape urban environmental policy. It provides an overview of the main concepts, actors, concerns and issues related to the urban environmental management.

The main important objective is to study: 1. the role of urban environmental management and its importance in urban planning; 2. the role of urban planning in improving the quality of life of the people living in the urban zones. During the study we will raise different problems related to urbanization, environmental issues, and the role of the city planners in the sustainable development.

The study also outlines approaches to environmental planning and management in the new urban interface, examining its specificity in terms of both the challenges faced and possible approaches for the implementation. This study highlights some of the management initiatives being taken and the main constraints accompanied by the new urbanization. The study also summarizes the main lessons learned: what worked the major problems and how these problems were addressed.

PARTICIPANTS: 150 inhabitants of Bathore¹ were part of the study, and they were selected at random. They were questioned about their attitudes and experiences in their new living place; 150 students of the third year of urban branch in the Architecture faculty² were a part of this study as well. They were interviewed about their opinions and concerns about the problems of the urbanization.

INSTRUMENTS: The study applies appropriate analytic method and highlights the impacts and challenges within the context of sustainable development. A number of instruments were developed to deal with the adverse environmental effects of urban growth and development. Interviews were realized with the inhabitants of Bathore about their opinions and interests, and about their living conditions in that area.

A questionnaire was administered during March and April 2010 and it was based on the students³ and dwellers` concerns on the urban environmental management. It consisted of five questions: 1. as humans we exploit the nature to meet our present needs, are we aware that we are destroying resources needed for the future? 2. Are you satisfied with the way how the municipality deals with the urban management? 3. Is there any environmental issue considered by you during the building process of your house? 4. Does central and local government support your environmental initiatives? The results of this study are presented according to the questions asked both to the students of architecture and the dwellers of Bathore.

¹ Bathore is a part of Kamza`s Municipality. It is located in the vicinity of the Tirana. During the period of dictatorship it did not exist.

² Architecture is part of the Civil Engineering Faculty of Polytechnic University of Tirana.

³ The students of the third year of architecture have in their curricula a subject called Urban Environmental Planning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As the cities' population grows, improving living standards without destroying the environment is a global challenge for 100% of the students and 60% of the dwellers. 85 % of students and 70 % dwellers think that natural resources are under increasing pressure, threatening public health and development. 100 % of students and 90% of the dwellers define sustainable urban development as development that improves the long-term social and ecological health of cities and towns.

Without practicing sustainable development, people of these new urban zones may face a deteriorating environment and may even cause ecological disaster (Wheeler, 2008). Practicing sustainable development requires a combination of wise public investment, effective natural resource management, cleaner agricultural and industrial technologies, less pollution, and slower population growth. Radical changes in city planning are being made to switch to sustainable development, with new cities being designed to be ecologically friendly guided by principles like carbon neutrality and self-sufficiency. 95 % of the students of urbanism faculty and 60% of the inhabitants consider that these principles are the main concern of the planners. The people's preserve or abuse the environment could largely determine whether living standards improve or deteriorate. Central to this issue is pollution, which involves the introduction of harmful substances into the air, land, and water. In urban planning, sound is not always measured as a source of pollution highlighted 75 % of the students and 90 % of them consider that sound aesthetics involves more than noise abatement and decibel measurements; and 95 % of them think that these concepts must be taken into consideration during the drafting process of the master plan.

The light has become a problem in the recent urban residential areas, not only as it relates to its effects but may cause security problems as well thought 80 % of the students and 76 % of the dwellers. Tall buildings in particular can have a substantial effect in channeling winds and shading large areas. The microclimate around the building will typically be assessed as part of the environmental impact assessment for the building thought 92% of the students and 64 of the dwellers.

Our currently economy consumes resources much faster than it can regenerate. 100% of the students and 82 % of the inhabitants highlighted that the humans are exploiting nature to meet present needs, and at the same time are destroying resources needed for the future and the bad management is the main cause of water shortages, soil exhaustion, loss of forests, air and water pollution, and degradation of coastlines which afflict many leaving areas.

72 % of students highlighted the role of participation of the public into the decision-making process as very important while 50% of dwellers consider legislation and the attention of central and local government as very a very decisive factor in the process of new urbanization.

URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN ALBANIA

Albanian towns and cities have expanded rapidly during these years and these newly urban areas make a major contribution to the country's economy. Although less than 1/3 of Albania's people live in these called mega cities and towns, these areas generate over 2/3 of the country's GDP and account for 90% of government revenues. (Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Water Administration. 2008 p. 26). Many recent developments were results of the large and the small-scale developers, who purchased land, designed the district and constructed the development from scratch. In the actual reconstruction, the general layout of the city was conserved, but it was not identical to that before the new urbanization. Despite the necessity of rapid reconstruction and the lack of financial means, authorities did take several measures to improve traffic flow, sanitation, and the aesthetics of the city, but that is not enough. The rapid urban environmental situation needs planning resources and strategies to address the problems of new urbanization development.

The key operational policies during this transit situation in Albania included the following: a) all Albanian cities drafted and implemented urban environmental protection plans; b) national and local government's plan was based upon specific urban environmental protection objectives; c) a comprehensive approach took control on urban wastewater, air pollution, solid waste, and noise pollution; and d) control on the implementation. Many steps toward sustainability can be taken today. These include: using energy more efficiently, managing cities better, and phasing out subsidies that encourage waste.

How people preserve or cause the damage of the environment could largely determine whether living standards improve or deteriorate (UNESCO Courier, 1999). 100% of the students of architecture think that urban environmental issues based on the five following integrated principles are considered as very important in management of the urban zones. They are described as: 1. well planned design in harmony with the environment; 2. optimum structure; 3. rational distribution; 4. appropriate construction; and 5. comprehensive renovation.

85 % of the dwellers of Bathore think that the rapid increase of urbanization in their area and the need for effective and efficient local governments is felt more now than ever. Meeting these needs of Albania's new urban populations is and will continue to be a strategic policy matter in the central and local government's plan. Immediate urban environmental issues that need to be addressed for 85 % of the students are because of: 1) poor local governance; 2) weak finances; 3) inappropriate planning that leads to high costs of housing and office space; 4) in some Albanian cities costs are among the highest in the world; 5) critical infrastructure shortages and major service deficiencies that include regular water and power supply, and inadequate transportation systems; 6) rapidly deteriorating environment.

Urbanisms, environmentalists and economists increasingly agree that efforts to protect the environment and to achieve better living standards can be closely linked and are mutually reinforcing. (Matheos, 2006). The following are some of the challenges that associate the urban environmental planning:

PLANNING: 1) urban local government lack a modern planning framework; 2) the multiplicity of local bodies obstructs efficient planning and land use; 3) rigid master plans and restrictive zoning regulations limit the land available for building in accordance with changing needs in the definition of urban and suburban planning (Garvin, 2002).

HOUSING: 1) building regulations that limit urban density - such as floor space standards - reduce the number of houses available, thereby pushing up property prices; 2) outdated rent control regulations reduce the number of houses available on rent (a critical option of the dwellers of very low income). 3) poor access to micro finance and mortgage finance limit the ability of low income groups to buy or rehabilitate their homes; 4) policy, planning, and regulation deficiencies lead to an increase of informal areas; 5) weak finances of urban local bodies and service providers leave them unable to expand the trunk infrastructure that housing developers need to develop the new sites.

INFRASTRUCTURE: 1) Most urban bodies do not generate the revenues needed to renew infrastructure, nor do they have the creditworthiness to access capital markets for funds; 2) urban transport planning needs are focused on moving vehicles rather than meeting the needs of the large numbers of people who walk or ride bicycles in Albanian towns and cities.

ENVIRONMENT: The deteriorating urban environment is harming the people's health and productivity and diminishing their quality of life.

The following figure 1 illustrates the three important dimensions which have to be considered during the implementation of urban environmental management.

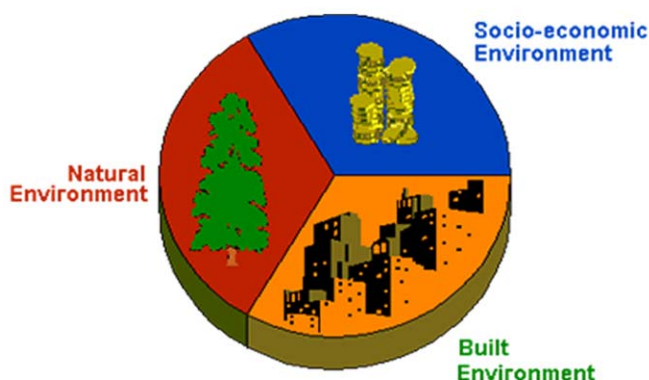


Figure 1: Natural, Socio & Building Environment.

1) **NATURAL ENVIRONMENT:** Resources, processes and effects related to flora and fauna, human beings, minerals, water, land, air, etc.

2) **BUILDING ENVIRONMENT:** Resources, processes and effects related to buildings, housing, roads, railways, electricity, water supply, gas etc.

3) **SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT:** Resources, processes and effects related to human activities, education, health, arts and culture, economic and business activities, heritage - urban lifestyles in general.

These three dimensions that constitute the “urban environment” are linked together in a way that if one dimension is neglected it poses the inevitable danger into the others. The interdependency and interdisciplinary of the three dimensions is to be fully understood in the development of coherent and sustainable policies and programs for the urban planning (Hari, 2010).

The following table 1 point out the most important elements of resources their processes and effects in the new urbanization, which should be taken into consideration during the urban environmental management plan.

Table 1: Resources, processes and effects of the new urbanization.

RESOURCES	PROCESSES	EFFECTS
Human Resources	Migration	Positive Effects Products, Value-addition, Increased knowledge education, Access to better services
Land	Population Growth	
Water	Residence/Living	Negative Effects Pollution - air, water, noise, Waste, garbage, sewage.
Sunlight	Community Services (Education, Health...)	
Electricity	Production/Manufacture	
Fuels	Transportation	
Minerals	Construction	
Finance		
Products		
Recyclable materials		

ENVIRONMENTAL AND COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

There are also debates about the mixing tenures and land uses, versus distinguishing geographic zones where different uses dominate. A practice known as Archaeology⁴ seeks to unify the fields of ecology and architecture, using principles of landscape architecture to achieve a harmonious environment for all human living. (Kipfer, 2009). It is a fact that environmental planners focus more on smaller and larger systems of resource extraction and consumption, energy production, and waste disposal at a time when in most advanced urban or village planning models, environmental local context is critical and as a matter of fact, more attention should be paid to many gardening and other outdoor activities which for 90% of the students are considered as important factor to assume a central role in the daily life of citizens.

⁴Encyclopedic Dictionary of Archaeology

“The European Union wishes to keep citizens informed about and involved in environmental matters and to improve the application of environmental legislation by approving the Convention on access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters” (Europa Summeries of Legislation 2010. p.4). As Albania has signed Aarhus Convection⁵, the public has special rights in decision making on environmental issues, which are based on sound analysis of available information. It works to create awareness among actors, and is oriented towards managing development processes. 65 % of the students, participants in the study, have heard about it. The fact that this Convention is considered as a Convention of Democracy in Environment and is considered as a barometer to measuring in practice the democratic rights, the low percentage shows that there is a lot to be done in the field of awareness campaigns. This Convention brought about collaborative planning as well, in response to the inadequacy of traditional public participation techniques to provide real opportunities for the public to make decisions affecting their communities , the collaboration in this stage according to (Williams, 2000) requires more information exchange. It was adopted as a theoretical framework for analyzing redevelopment processes in large urban distressed areas. This method according to the 95% of students and 55 % of the inhabitants of Bathore helps in empowering the public and the stakeholders by bringing them to the level of decision-makers through direct engagement and dialogue between stakeholders and public agencies in the community planning process. 97% of students and 65% of dwellers highlight that active public involvement can help planners achieve better outcomes by making them aware of the public’s needs and preferences. According to both students and inhabitants of the study good collaboration can result in more meaningful participation and better, more creative outcomes to persistent environmental and urban problems than traditional participation methods can have. 100% of the students think that it enables planners to make decisions that reflect community needs and values by fostering faith in the wisdom and utility of the results. This can be inked to public policy instrument which VENDUNG (1998) defines as the set of techniques by which the governmental authorities attempt to support and effect or prevent social change. More citizens who call for democratic planning & development processes will play a huge role in allowing the public to make important decisions as part of the planning and management process.

⁵ The Aarhus Convention is a Treaty of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Adopted in 1998 in the Danish city of Aarhus, its full title is ‘Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters’.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The stabilization of the new urbanization will have a powerful positive effect on living standards and therefore urban environmental management would be able to meet better the challenges of sustainable development.

2. Training planners based on foreign experiences on drafting master plans, and taking into consideration social and political context within the framework of planning process may have direct positive impact during the management of urban environmental projects.

3. The results suggest that viewing the planning as a possible bridge between theory and practice, introduces a new communication approach with an active involvement of the public stakeholders.

3. The strategic planning based on the identification of strengths and weakness of the implementation of urban environmental zones and based on a logical framework with the participation of the public would be a very decisive factor during the management process.

4. Public awareness may be organized according to a well thought strategy.

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