

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AS ONE OF THE PRIORITIES OF ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: This paper highlights the most recent environmental issues that have evolved into national, regional, and global concerns, with particular attention to the role of environmental governance and its social, economic, and financial implications for citizens of North Macedonia.

The research emphasizes institutional responsibility in environmental management taken by the government of North Macedonia toward implementing environmental strategies, while also analysing the alignment of domestic legislation with European Union directives, conventions, and standards. By researching both local and international institutional frameworks, the study reveals outcomes that have contributed to environmental progress. Attention is directed toward transnational strategies on the approaches of international organizations, including the United Nations, and the strategic orientation of the European Union, especially in relation to the European Green Deal. These perspectives are considered in light of the institutional capacity and commitment required at the EU level.

The abstract of this work provides valuable input for building institutional mechanisms that can ensure a clear environmental outlook at both national and international levels, supported by relevant ecological studies.

Keywords: goals, environment, sustainable development, UN, EU, North Macedonia, Green Deal agreement, citizens.

1. INTRODUCTION

Investments in the green sector and the terminology of sustainable development are becoming increasingly recognized among people, politicians, scientists, non-governmental and governmental organizations, tourists, as well as foreign and domestic investors. All of them share an interest in the future of nations, international relations, nature, and authentic local experiences worldwide. Sustainable development enables these actors to engage and contribute more directly to social well-being, human resources, nature, and culture, while also fulfilling their need for physical activity during travel.

According to author Tatyana P. Subotica, “Sustainable development may perhaps be described as equal and balanced.” (Soubbotina, 2020) This means that development must be continuous and must balance diverse interests. From this perspective, balancing interests encompasses the political, social, economic, and human spheres.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Commission) defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Our common future, 1987)

This definition supports the perspectives on sustainable development in the Republic of North Macedonia and synthesizes a range of ideas and visions. In essence, sustainable development is a process of transformation that allows the creation of a system with long-term values, building resilience at the intersections of fundamental structures—water, energy, economy, and decision-making, in order to enhance the well-being of the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia. (NATIONS, 2025). Such a system is considered a dynamic technological advancement, where institutional changes harmonize and expand current potentials to meet human needs and aspirations.

2. RESEARCH

The research also addresses the European Union (EU) strategy and its role in the environmental policy implementation process, comparing it to the European Green Agreement, based on the content and commitment of institutional capacities at EU level. The results of this thesis contribute to the construction of institutional mechanisms to provide a clear local and international environmental perspective, based on relevant ecological studies. The research methods used for this thesis are mixed methods that cover the review of literature from secondary sources, the collection of primary data through quantitative and qualitative methods.

This paper will also contribute to changing the attitude of citizens of North Macedonia towards the environment and will motivate them for ongoing activism in terms of raising environmental awareness.

The research methods applied in this thesis rely on a combined approach, where qualitative data is gathered from participants through techniques such as interviews and focus groups, while both quantitative and qualitative methods are integrated to provide a comprehensive analysis. The literature review encompasses academic articles published in international journals on environmental policy and sustainable development, national legislation and international treaties, books authored by recognized scholars, reports from regional

organizations and institutions, conference proceedings, online resources, and lecture notes. By comparing the legislation of North Macedonia with international frameworks, as well as with countries that are considered leaders in effective environmental policies, the study outlines three main dimensions: intra-state comparisons within a single country, inter-state comparisons between two or more countries, and inter-regional studies that examine states across regions, including global perspectives, in order to view the research within broader dimensions.

3. FINDINGS

Strategic Priorities of the Republic of North Macedonia for Achieving Sustainable Development

Since the Brundtland Commission meeting in 1985, the concept of sustainable development has gained political and strategic dimensions. Uncontrolled energy production and unmonitored policies and plans continue to pose major challenges to achieving sustainable development in North Macedonia. Gaps and negative practices in environmental policies, along with various climate problems, have created an alarming situation, ranking the country among the most polluted globally. (Pollution by country Retrieved from <https://worldpopulationreview.com>, 2022).

According to 2019 assessments of global air quality, “the country is considered to have one of the highest levels of pollution in Europe, making sustainable development more difficult.” Although the sale of coal for heating was banned through legislative changes in 2019, the largest polluters remain fossil fuels such as coal, carbon, carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), and nitrogen oxide. Inspections have revealed that most pollution originates from domestic companies. To reduce air pollution, the State Environmental Inspectorate has conducted deep monitoring and controls at both local and central levels. Once accredited, the Central Environmental Laboratory will be fully available, and annual cooperation agreements will be signed with accredited laboratories for super-control. (Environmental monitoring and inspection reports. Retrieved from <https://www.moepp.gov.mk>, 2019)

Reports indicate that focusing solely on technical monitoring has created disruptions in social well-being and institutional gaps, hindering the full achievement of a sustainable institutional model in North Macedonia. Government strategic plans have also envisioned local programs financed by international actors to meet citizens’ basic needs. Through circular economy models, the aim is to reduce costs across sectors by using renewable energy, promoting sustainable waste management, ensuring fair water and energy management, and advancing green transport. By the end of 2025, at least 60% of waste generated in North Macedonia is expected to be processed according to European recycling standards (Planning, 2019). Debates on sustainability distinguish between strong and weak models. Strong sustainability argues that humanity must live within the planet’s ecological limits, while weak sustainability suggests that natural capital can be replaced by human-created capital (Sustainable Development: A Review of International Literature, 2006). This reflects growing awareness that sustainable development models must penetrate national agendas. As Angel Gurria noted, “Improving the quality of our lives should be the ultimate goal of public policies. But public policies can yield the best results only if they are based on reliable tools to measure the improvements they seek to produce in our lives” (Gurria, 2011) North Macedonia’s government priorities remain a guarantee for maintaining a decisive position within the European Union and for building a balanced national and international legal system. Strategic priorities focus on environmental protection, sustainable development, reducing air pollution, addressing climate change, and ensuring rapid economic growth. These priorities respond to global transformations that threaten economic and social stability. As Angela Merkel emphasized, “We must learn new ways to define the concept of growth for the 21st century” (Merkel, 2010, February 6)

North Macedonia’s environmental and sustainable development policies are supported by numerous national strategies, including: National Strategy for Nature Protection (2017–2027), National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2018–2023), Energy Development Strategy until 2040, Risk Management Strategy (2018–2020), Climate Change and Environment Strategy, Water Strategy, Waste Management Strategy (2008–2020), Kyoto Protocol-based strategies (2008–2012), National Sustainable Development Strategy (multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral), Public Awareness and Data Management Strategy (National Strategies, 2021) The main goal of adopting these strategies is to fulfil international obligations, particularly those related to EU accession and harmonization with the *acquis Communautaire*. According to the OECD, environmental policies must ensure regeneration and renewable use of resources without exceeding long-term limits or causing negative environmental effects.

The Government Program of 2021 defined environmental protection and clean air as top priorities. This reform plan aims to improve air quality by fully replacing monitoring instruments and applying modern mathematical models for pollution forecasting. (Government program for environmental protection and clean air, 2021). The government’s principles for 2021 emphasized combating environmental pollution and achieving sustainable development, with a focus on agriculture, transport, energy, health, digitalization, and industrial policy. The plan also envisioned new heating systems in all institutions by 2024 to guarantee cleaner air and environmental protection. According to a UN publication, “The fragile state of developed market economies, imbalances, and

rising oil and commodity prices slow global economic growth. Financial turmoil is not accidental but reflects systemic failures in global financial markets. These conditions threaten efforts toward sustainable development goals” (Achieving sustainable development, 2008). Based on this, North Macedonia’s strategies aim to strengthen public services through programs addressing social, economic, and environmental determinants of health, while being responsive to the climate emergency as a health crisis. Among essential measures are subsidies for air conditioners to replace inefficient heating devices that rely on solid and fossil fuels. (Governmental program for environmental protection and clean air Retrieved from <https://vlada.mk/strateshki-prioriteti> (vlada.mk in Bing), 2021). The government also plans to create models for basic income, focusing economic policies on human and ecosystem well-being. Other priorities include job creation, partnerships among communities, governments, businesses, and civil society, and limiting corporate influence. The institutional framework for sustainable development in North Macedonia is led by the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, supported by other ministries whose policies affect economic growth, social justice, health, agriculture, infrastructure, and transport. Legislative changes, such as those regulating vehicles for environmental classification, illustrate how sectoral policies contribute to reducing pollution. (Maleski, 2019–2020). Annual monitoring reports reveal persistent challenges: air pollution from traffic, industry, energy plants, households, construction, and illegal landfills remains high. (Environmental statistics of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021). Weak institutional capacity, insufficient inspectors, and inadequate budget planning hinder effective implementation of sustainable development policies. Progressive policies include decentralized renewable energy projects in wind and solar power. Yet public awareness of sustainability remains low, and citizens demand stronger infrastructure for waste management, recycling, and public services. Effective sustainable development requires coordinated planning, clear priorities, measurable indicators, and financing responsibilities. (Hadži-Vasileva, 2018)

4. CONCLUSION

Energy in North Macedonia will remain a critical sector: 60% of domestic electricity production comes from coal, alongside hydropower plants (Strategic Environmental Assessment Report, 2019). Statistics from 2021 show high reliance on coal, with 98% used for electricity generation. Addressing this requires legislative reform, investment in renewable resources, and subsidies for cleaner technologies such as electric vehicles and natural gas projects. (Strategic Environmental Assessment Report. Draft strategy for energy in North Macedonia, 2019). North Macedonia’s rich ecosystems, shaped by its Mediterranean climate and diverse flora and fauna, play a vital role in sustainable development. However, forestry remains in poor condition despite the 2006 National Strategy for Sustainable Forestry, limiting its protective role against erosion and biodiversity loss. International cooperation is central. Since the Rio Conference (1992), North Macedonia has joined over 500 international treaties and conventions on environment and sustainability, including the Espoo Convention, Aarhus Convention, Kyoto Protocol, and Basel Convention. (Database on environmental law. FAO, IUCN, UNEP. Retrieved from <https://www.ecolex.org>, 2019–2020). These agreements form a legal framework for environmental protection, though practical implementation remains limited. The European Union also plays a decisive role. Through instruments such as IPA funds, Horizon 2020, and the European Green Deal, North Macedonia receives financial and technical support to align with EU standards. EU cohesion and structural funds have strengthened rural development, agriculture, and competitiveness. (Commission staff working document: North Macedonia progress report., 2020).

As an input several suggestions from civil activists and experts have been accepted for improving certain laws. Specifically, the Law on Environmental Inspection adopted the concept proposed by the Civil Inspection Council GIS, to coordinate state and local inspectors in covering the entire territory, with mandatory training for inspectors, but also to open information of public character to citizens. How much these laws will be implemented will again depend on institutional capacity at the state and local level, as well as on the political will to place the right people in the right positions.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Industrial policy emphasizes digitalization, circular economy, and modernization, though COVID-19 exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains and social protection. (Communication on EU enlargement policy: North Macedonia progress report. , 2021). That is a fundamental aspect for a development of candidate county such as North Macedonia. Ultimately, environmental policy in North Macedonia is both a national priority and an international obligation. Achieving sustainable development requires stronger institutional capacity, public awareness, and integration of environmental goals into all sectors of governance. The country’s path and efforts towards EU accession makes environmental protection not only a domestic necessity but also a strategic commitment to global sustainability.

The legislation of North Macedonia and the laws on green policies should be taken as an unavoidable priority and implemented within the system, involving all state actors and civil society. Environmental contamination

must be monitored by larger inspection groups, and against environmental offenders, in accordance with the damage caused, legal lawsuits should be raised.

There should be closer cooperation between ministries such as: the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, Labor and Social Welfare, Economy, Finance, and Transport, in order to ensure synergistic management of the environment. Above all, an integrated and systematic approach of the responsible ministries would also be necessary to contribute to economic growth (investments in agriculture and the development of the private sector), which would serve as a stimulus for the labour market. This should be done through investments in various sectors of youth and women's employment, among others.

Local communities should be involved in combating environmental problems. The government, ministries, and local authorities should engage more in raising citizens' awareness about care for the living environment. The Ministry of Environment should inform and communicate with citizens about information and projects offered by the European Union in North Macedonia.

Citizens should be educated about environmental protection, in identifying environmental problems, and in presenting them transparently to local or state authorities.

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