

Contemporary Issues Relating to the Environment

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Abstract

Humanity is faced with a series of problems, most of them in connection with the overturning of our system of values as contemporary society is dominated by consumption, by economic aspects. It's all about the economy. Population around the world is increasing, we are dealing with poverty and, paradoxically, there are areas in which food is wasted and resources fully exploited. What can we do when we have to feed billions and maintain the quality of the environment, conserve and protect? Political decisions are influenced by economic aspects and political decision makers behold helplessly, or with indifference, everything the environment loses every moment. Things must be changed; we must not focus only on organization of and participation in conferences on environmental problems. Everything is in vain if the conclusions we draw are not accompanied by concrete actions.

Keywords: *environment, sustainable development, global warming, politics*

Introduction

The human being is an important element of the environment, as it can create and destroy with the same ease. For decades now, a series of events have been organized at international level, alarm signals have need drawn, and still, we are in the presence of major problems: Global warming, atmospheric pollution, drought, famine, deforestation, genetically modified organisms and the list could go on. Barry Commener made the following statement: "Environmental degradation is due to a shortcoming of human activity. Earth is polluted, but not because man would be a particularly dirty animal and neither because the human species is too numerous. Blame goes to the human society - the way society understands to obtain, classify and use the riches human labor draws from the planet." [1] The statement is as fair as possible, with one single amendment: contemporary problems are caused by the increase in population which led to the excess exploitation of resources. It is true that human society didn't know it, but at this time we can affirm with certainty that it is not in a position to address all issues, because the economic factor dictates politics.

There are a number of aspects that have been raised, not only by the civil society, but also by officials of different states concerned about environmental damage. Of these, the following may be brought up for discussion: global warming

and the greenhouse effect, atmospheric pollution, drought, deforestation, famine, GMOs⁷, etc.

This paper aims to approach these problems, to bring to the foreground studies conducted on these themes and the consequences that we all must endure due to non-adherence to protecting nature and the environment in which we live, but also the possible solutions that we should embrace to counterbalance the effects of such disastrous consequences. Damage to the environment is not just a local problem, for the decaying and pollutant factors would not assume a static approach. Affecting an area inevitably triggers damage to other areas, sometimes irrecoverably.

Increase in the globalization process, particularly economic-wise, but also standardized objectives and instruments for achieving this as a result of globalization of environmental problems. [2] These issues concern the international community, which proves helpless a lot of the time, but a positive thing is that they started to adopt measures in this respect.

In literature a number of principles governing the environmental policies have been identified and they are important for keeping these issues under control [3]:

- prevention principle - the best strategy is to prevent, being much more efficient than to fix the effects of pollution. The principle is to be found mainly in international law, being evoked as well in the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice;
- precautionary principle - has been enshrined in legislation in 1974, in Germany, in the context of air pollution and means that public authorities must take action regarding the factors which may affect the environment and human health, and this principle is linked to the prevention principle, i.e. not hindering the developments in technology;
- integration principle - public authorities take into account the implementation and definition of their policies and actions. The principle has sparked a series of debates, and at EU level the importance of integrating environmental requirements in public policies is brought to the foreground;

⁷ GMO - Genetically modified organisms

- polluter pays principle - the principle was launched in recommendation of the OECD⁸ in 1972 and takes into account the fact that the polluter should bear the costs of measures taken to ensure environment protection.

Global warming and greenhouse effect

One of the definitions of global warming refers to that phenomenon of increase in average temperatures in atmosphere at ground level and also ocean level. In the '60s, following the industrial development which resulted in an increase in concentrations of greenhouse gases, regarded as the main cause of this phenomenon, there have been concerns in this respect. Several studies show a tendency towards global warming and what worries the most is the continuous heating up of polar areas. [4]

The United Nations, on a number of occasions, has asked authorities that until the year 2050 to give up using coal as the main source of energy, replacing it with alternative energy sources. This would help to really limit global warming and would allow getting 0.5 °C nearer to the objectives drawn by the UN. [5]

Activities carried out by humans are closely related to the environment and the resources, but health, economic stability and social safety are important for shaping the quality of life. The Stockholm Conference in 1972 brought to the foreground issues that may affect humanity in the long term. The aspect regarding sustainable development is included in the founding treaties of the European Union, in the sense that internal market is acting for the sustainable development of Europe, being based on balanced economic growth, on a social market economy with increased competitiveness, which is aimed at full employment, social progress, but also a high level of protection and improvement in the quality of the environment. [6]

Another important protocol was signed in Kyoto, Japan in 1997. Since the international community was aware of the changes which had arisen at climate level, signing the treaty and especially assuming responsibility was necessary. It was not well received by all nations, particularly by those which were also among the largest polluters. One of the conditions for the enforcement of this agreement was to be ratified by at least 55 nations, a condition which was not to be carried out until 2004, when Russia ratified the protocol.

⁸ OECD- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

The Protocol came after signing the Framework Convention of the United Nations on climate change, and its goal was lowering gas emissions in developed countries to 5 %, up to the year 2012, as compared to 1990. [7] Policies proposed by the Kyoto Protocol were meant to be implemented at European level as well. The Commission was authorized by the Council to participate on February 4, on behalf of the European Community, to the negotiations on the Framework Convention of the United Nations on climate change, adopted in May 1992. The European Community ratified the Convention by Decision 94/69/EC of December 1993, enforcing it one year later. This Convention set in place some key principles in an effort to fight climate change. One of the most important principles was that of common, but differentiated, responsibility. A minus of this Convention is that it does not contain commitments in figures broken down in detail for each country regarding the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. At the meeting held in Berlin in 1995, states that were part of the Convention decided to sign a protocol in this respect. Thus the Kyoto Protocol took shape, and the European Community signed the protocol in April 1998 and 3 years later the Council of Laeken confirmed the Union's desire that the protocol be enforced before Johannesburg Summit in 2002. By Decision 2002/358/EC the protocol is hereby approved on behalf of the European Community. [8] Even if there are concerns in this respect, the efforts do not seem to give results. There must be some action beyond its purely declaratory nature. USA, responsible for a large part of the issues which were the subject of the Kyoto Protocol, did not wish to become a party to this Protocol.

Another problem that concerned society at international level was the greenhouse effect. In normal parameters, this greenhouse effect does not cause damage to the environment, on the contrary, it helps plants grow, thereby creating an ambient conducive to their growth. As in other cases, it is about exceeding the parameters. "Carbon dioxide and other substances allow ultraviolet rays to pass very easily, reach the surface of the ground and transform into thermal energy; this energy is hard to penetrate back, thus causing the greenhouse effect... But, in too large quantities, these elements responsible for the greenhouse effect will lead to an increase in temperature... Carbon dioxide is a food for plants, but when it is in excess, becomes a pollutant. Currently the carbon dioxide amount is 0.03%. Assuming that this quantity will be doubled, temperature around the globe may increase by 1.3 to 3 degrees Celsius." [9]

Atmospheric pollution

Atmosphere is defined as being the gaseous envelope surrounding Earth which, not having a precise limit, reaches into the extra-terrestrial space. It is intended both for the protection of Earth, as well as for maintaining temperatures favorable for the development of life. Air is polluted because of natural phenomena, but also because of the activities carried out by humans, who produce changes in the concentration levels of natural constituents. Sources of pollution are: natural (terrestrial radioactivity, lightning and electrical discharges, decomposition of organic materials, etc) and anthropogenic (those which result from human activities which may lead to air pollution: industry, household heating sources, etc). [10]

Unfortunately, we live in a society that encourages consumption. It is not only about the quality of life, because in this case progress must be part of community life. It is about the excesses which may lead to resource exhaustion, as there is an increasingly large offset between rich countries and poor countries, with most of the latter being source of resources to be used by highly developed countries.

There should be consistent, easy to enforce environmental policies. "Also, the policy on the environment is disregarded. Competing to attract big companies that create job opportunities in their countries, almost all governments have given up their plans for eco-reform or have postponed them... Little by little, governments everywhere in the world lose the ability to interfere in the development of their nations...The economy is devouring the politics." [11]

At national level, the ability to draw up the legislative framework lies with national legislative bodies, which are the supreme representatives and have a responsibility not only resulting from their duties, but also a moral responsibility for those they represent. [12]

Municipalities, under their right, and their self-governing abilities, under their own responsibility, may adopt administrative acts, policies, strategies to help the community to grow and also to protect the surrounding environment. [13]

Romania's Constitution recognizes, in Article 35, every person's right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment. But, natural and legal persons share the obligation to protect and improve the environment. Citizens have sufficient means to protect their rights, and can even take matters to Court in this respect. [14]

Drought and famine

Environmental disturbances have also caused large humanitarian crises. With a population on the rise and the depletion of water resources, humanity is faced with such problems. Poor countries can no longer cope and need help from the developed countries to get out of the crisis. On the other side, the latter are not completely foreign to the causes of humanitarian disasters. Former great empires, they were not concerned particularly about implementing policies that would have resulted in developing the former colonies.

Main cause of famine is drought, which would affect not only countries on the African continent, but also continents who believe that they are sheltered from this phenomenon. In Africa, drought is: "a direct consequence of climatic factors that have changed the direction of precipitations in such a way that they are heading mainly towards the Indian Ocean. According to the latest research, a key factor of these changes in the direction of floods is the rapid heating, in the past 30-40 years, of the Indian Ocean surface ... But there are also other factors linked directly to the human activity that contribute to the current humanitarian catastrophe, namely the inability of the countries struck by severe drought to cope with this phenomenon. In the first place, the political situation in these countries plays an important role: the nature and style of executives and high level of uncertainty induced by civil wars and other conflicts." [15]

Drought will be a problem not only for poor countries, as more and more studies show that Europe included, all will be affected by drought, particularly Southern territories thereof, which will face an increase of 80% in the periods of drought to the present period, by the end of this century. The European Commission has carried out a study which provides that the drop in water reserves will be caused, among other things, by an increase in population and a rise in water consumption, with economic and social consequences - losses of 100 billion Euros are estimated at the level of European Union countries only in the last three decades. [16]

Instead of conclusions:

There is no doubt that humanity is faced with a number of problems that result directly from human action. Uncontrolled deforestation, excessive use of water resources, atmosphere pollution, etc, all cause major social problems. Failure to apply, in a consistent and responsible manner, the policies on environmental

protection will certainly result in a natural disaster. The good news is represented by the mental awakening of individuals regarding these problems; thus, people become more concerned about protecting the environment, and those countries that until now were considered among the biggest polluters (USA and the People's Republic of China), have stated at the latest UN press conference in 2014 that they will submit greater efforts to protect climate. A big step forward.

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