

## THE MOST IMPORTANT TASKS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN HUNGARY

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What follows is a summary of a discussion. Twelve experts concerned with environmental protection were asked to express opinions on ecological problems in present-day Hungary and to propose measures for their solution. In the preparation of this summary an outline sketch written on a blackboard was used during the discussion. The following text was originally prepared in Hungarian and a list of those taking part in the discussion is given at the end.

### *An evaluation of the current environmental situation*

(What are the most pressing environmental problems in Hungary? What are their most serious consequences for health? Which areas of the country are the most endangered? What kind of economic resources are needed to put things right? What political obstacles stand in the way?)

In addition to the massive financial debt, the economic and social policies of the last decades have accumulated an immense debt in our environment and in human health.

The environmental crisis manifests itself in forms generally similar to those observed elsewhere in the world. The participants in the discussion mentioned symptoms like:

- groundwater pollution;
- depletion and pollution of karst water resources;

- the lack of potable water in about a thousand communities (mainly because of contamination by nitrites and nitrates);
- increasingly threatened aquatic habitats (Lake Balaton, Lake Velence, the rivers Danube, Sajo, Hernad, etc);
- pollution of the soil (nitrates, heavy metals, plant protection chemicals, hazardous waste, oil products);
- destruction of arable land (poldering, soil compaction, sodification, erosion, etc);
- serious air pollution on and around roads and traffic interchanges (carbon monoxide, oxides of nitrogen, hydrocarbons, lead);
- frequent smog in towns, primarily in Budapest;
- air pollution caused by heavy industry (metal-processing and energy-producing industries, the cement industry, the chemical industry, etc);
- damage to forests;
- the disappearance of complex ecosystems;
- health damage caused by air pollution (an estimated 8 - 8.5 milliard forints annually);
- an increasing death rate (principally among men aged 30 - 40);
- an increasing occurrence of tumours, as well as of cardiovascular diseases;
- mental problems in the population (frustration, stress, alcoholism, suicide);
- serious noise pollution, major damage to hearing.

Air pollution, for example, is not only a scientifically acknowledged problem with consequences such as global warming and acidification. In Hungary polluted air is now a factor causing a continuous feeling of threat in the population of industrial centres, as well as in those living close to traffic junctions and in inner city areas. Water pollution, degradation of arable land, etc are not exclusively Hungarian phenomena. But as one participant in the discussion pointed out, radioactive contamina-

tion, not directly perceptible by people, is a problem hardly examined or publicised in Hungary.

Geographically, Hungary lies in a basin partially enclosed by the Carpathian Mountains, and therefore highly defenceless against water and air pollution coming from the region. The above-mentioned phenomena are characteristic of the entire east-central European region; the environmental situation in the neighbouring countries is just as critical as in Hungary. Of course, the territorial distribution of the problems is uneven both in the region and in Hungary. As to the degree and character of the damage already done, some areas may be less affected and in relatively good condition. On the other hand, some areas totally unaffected by environmental damage have disappeared completely, while large continuous stretches of country can be considered to be heavily damaged or polluted.

First among the most affected areas are big towns, industrial centres and zones adjacent to the busiest traffic routes. Heavy industry established around coal and metal-ore mines explains the territorial concentration of Hungarian industry along a north-east-southwest axis.

The problems of this industrial zone do not merely derive from its environmental condition. Difficulties in certain branches (coal mining and the steel industry) make it a crisis area economically and socially too. Although outside this zone, Pécs and its surroundings with their coal and uranium mines are in a similar situation.

Another determinant in this spatial structure is the line of the Danube. The symptoms multiply at the crossing of the two zones - in the Dorog basin and in Budapest and its surroundings. The area along the Danube bears the marks of the systematic industrialisation of the last fifty years: cement production (Labatlan, Vac), aluminium production (Almástüzitő), oil refining (Szöny, Szazhalombatta), steel production (Dunaujvaros), nuclear energy (Paks), river canalisation (Szigetköz, Nagymaros, the Soroksar branch of the Danube). In addition to this, the river is the recipient of the waste and pollution stemming from intensive agriculture and rapid urbanisation. Budapest has reached a critical condition primarily as a result of traffic-generated air pollution. Differences within the city are great; children living in the dilapidated Seventh District or in the distinguished Rose Hill

may have life expectancies as different as those in developing countries and those living in West Germany.

Concentrated environmental dangers threaten specially protected areas, where even spectacular, formal regulations have been unable to guarantee a satisfactory outcome; these areas have proved to be defenceless against the short-term interests of industry, agriculture, forestry and tourism. The same is true for our surface and groundwater resources. Years ago it became clear that about two-thirds of all drinking water in the country were threatened; preventive measures were not taken because of an alleged lack of money. The exact determination of the extent of the danger and the working out of a suitable policy (the demarcation of hydro-geologically protective areas, the restriction of polluting activities) are urgent tasks, however great an economic burden they might represent.

Drainage of the Small Balaton, the use of chemicals in agriculture, intensive livestock breeding and the over-crowded recreation areas have in the past decade seriously compromised the water quality of Lake Balaton and the living systems there. Thanks to the fact that it has been treated as a high-priority area (a resort for high-ranking party and government officials, an important source of hard currency on account of tourism), a several milliard forint protection programme, started some years ago, has helped to prevent total collapse.

The use of agrochemicals and an increase in untreated domestic and industrial sewage has been responsible for the general contamination of groundwaters. This represents a serious problem. The national water management authority laid great emphasis on extending the public water supply, while sewage treatment and construction of mains drainage did not keep pace.

Almost a thousand communities now have contaminated drinking water. Contamination progressed more rapidly than main drainage construction and the number of settlements lacking potable water increased continuously, despite the construction of regional water networks.

These phenomena are manifestations, threatening signs of a critical, unstable situation where the probability of disasters occurring, of a sudden halt in normal functioning and of the ruin of assets is

particularly high. Behind these phenomena lies the final disappearance of irretrievable species and ecosystems which, consequently, will not "clean away" what we leave behind us. Among these could be forests and arable land and the destruction of aquatic habitats and genetic resources.

On the other hand, problems of air, soil and water are also symptoms, in the sense that the immediate elimination of the perceived problems is insufficient (treatment of the symptoms is not enough). These problems have appeared in particular economic situations and in a given social milieu. A strategy which aims at the mere elimination of the consequences itself contributes to the conservation of the same conditions, strongly supported by special interest groups.

This helps to explain the main line of the present official environmental strategy, which consists of centrally financed symptom-treating interventions (filters, sites for the disposal of hazardous wastes, incineration plants, etc). This kind of approach does little more than reorganise conflicts in space and time, instead of tackling the problems at the root. This strategy, which has occasionally tried to shift the onus of environmental conflicts on to weakly organised and poorly represented groups within the population, has triggered off numerous protests (Dorog, Ofalu, Kétpó, etc). In these cases, representatives of the authorities voiced their consternation and reproached the local protesting groups for attempting to hamper the cause of environmental protection. A similar strategy of shifting burdens on to the weaker can be detected in the case of the importation of hazardous waste into Hungary, Austrian participation in the Nagymaros hydropower plant and the offer made by some Western companies to build nuclear power stations in Hungary. The population, however, has already made several successful bids to stop such undertakings (Mosonmagyaróvár, Nagymaros) and similar resistance will probably develop against additional nuclear power plants. One of the greatest - and not exclusively environmental - problems of East European economies is (heavy) industry which consumes too much raw material and too much energy, while at the same time struggling with efficiency problems. In the accounting system used so far, in which the consideration of ecologically disastrous production

was regarded as positive, a trap developed. Those with an interest in preserving existing industrial structures defended their positions by referring to apparent savings.

This attitude did not promote the healing of environmental wounds. On the contrary, it made matters worse. At the same time, this economic approach is embedded in a social atmosphere and attitude that contribute to the persistence of the above-mentioned processes. Part of this is a certain consumer attitude, the copy of an earlier Western model. The élite, feeling its rapid loss of power and trying to prolong its own existence, did much to introduce a lower quality, but environmentally increasingly ruinous, local variation of this model, mainly by subsidising consumption by means of Western loans. Moreover, this élite used up common property, exhausting the resources of the future even more uncontrollably and irresponsibly. The exhausting of natural and economic resources cannot be separated from the using-up of social resources, which led to a social crisis contemporaneous with the environmental one.

The values, together with the social and moral views (propagated by violent means), of the élite in power and the political practices which resulted proved to be unfit for the regulation of social life. But while the failure of centrally-planned economies and centrally-directed societies is now widely accepted, it is much less known that the societies based on a market economy have been equally unable to tackle the environmental crisis.

### *Tasks and objectives*

(Solutions power can offer. Solutions market can offer. Solutions offered by different movements. What are the short-term tasks? What are the long-range objectives?)

It clearly follows from the above that it is not enough to treat and eliminate symptoms. In the case of the most burning problems, it is of course necessary to remove the immediate danger, but it must be obvious that such measures cannot replace the solutions to the basic issues. The aim of a successful long-range strategy is the transformation of the production and consumption technologies of society. This, however, is not merely, nor

primarily, a question of technological innovation. The participants in the discussion pointed to basic problems, such as:

- decentralisation of the social and political structure;
- the development of self-regulating capacity and diversity in society;
- freedom of information;
- deference to human rights, guaranteeing of the rule of law;
- the role of civil society in organising ecologically-interested social forces;
- economic evaluation of natural resources;
- role of banks in environmental protection (eco-banks for appropriate handling of Western financial support for environmental protection);
- limitation of monopolies;
- defence of the non-convertible, non-replaceable primary assets, etc.

The participants in the discussion, though with different emphasis, considered, as equally important, the renewal of state-organised environmental protection and the strengthening of environmental movements in society.

Earlier, the official environmental protection agencies were under the exclusive control of political groups and economic lobbies in whose interest it was to ignore the environmental problem. They only began to react to the pressure from the grass-roots ecological movements recently, when the ruling élite lost the possibility of total control over civil society. Clearly, the environmental protection agencies will be thoroughly reorganised after the general election and, most probably, separated from the water management authority with which it was merged in 1987. The new Parliament will probably pass new and more practicable laws for the protection of the environment than the regulations at present in force. The principal new political parties devote a relatively large amount of space to ecological questions in their programmes, but it may well be that once in power their commitment will weaken and that they will make concessions to "realistic" considerations. Such a process could be altered by civil environmental bodies. These have recently shown signs of positive development; alongside mili-

tant groups, better organised associations are also appearing, concentrating on particular tasks (research, network organisation, consultancy services, education) and trying to acquire better technical and financial conditions for their work than hitherto. But since civil society is poor in financial resources, these institutions have to look for foreign support.

Both international and Hungarian experiences show that initiatives on environmental questions come mostly from the civil institutions. It is therefore particularly important to secure the necessary conditions and funds for their work, without impairing their independence and freedom to act.

For the functioning of the state and civil sectors, appropriate information is needed. This is not merely a technical question, since the legal framework for free access to information is still not in place.

Both sectors must be prepared, possibly over an extended period of time, for the difficulties stemming from the transitional character of the economy. It is evident that the attitudes found in modern Western societies and shaped over several centuries will not take root in Hungary overnight. On the contrary, Hungarian attitudes, morals and values will in numerous respects distort the new market economy and a process of adjustment and acclimatisation will probably go on for decades. In addition to this, one will still have to reckon with the presence of monopolistic state enterprises, while the market-oriented attitude will also generate a number of environmental conflicts. However, it is generally accepted that the market economy, within the frame of a parliamentary democracy, guarantees a better protection for the environment than state socialism. In the former, conflicts at least come to light, hopefully before the damage, becomes irreversible. Several of the participants expressed criticism of the expected impact of the introduction of a market economy on the environment, pointed out that the values excluded from market automatisms have to be defended by a far-sighted policy and the working out of priorities. Hungary needs political-economic programmes that integrate into themselves the handling of the environmental problems, not as an additional activity, but as an organic part of the energy, industry, traffic, etc policies. These conceptions are destined to represent the ecological

approach and post-industrial values in general. However, one thing must be clear. What matters is not ideas, but actions. Ideas are only modest attempts to modify real processes.

*The participants in the discussion were:*

- ISTVAN EMBER, PH.D. - Institute of Public Health, Debrecen University of Medicine;
- CSABA FERENCZ - Department of Geophysics, Eötvös Lorand University of Sciences. A founding member of ISTER;
- LAJOS GYÖRGY - Physician, Institute of Advanced Medical Studies. A leader of the Eötvös Lorand University of Sciences Environment Protection Club;
- SANDOR KERÉKES, PH.D. - Department of Merchandise and Industrial Technology, Budapest University of Economics;
- PROF. JOZSEF KINDLER, PH.D. - Department of Company Economics, Budapest University of Economics. A founding member of ISTER;

- TIHAMER KISS KEVE, PH.D. - Danube Research Station, Hungarian Academy of Sciences;

- PROF. PETER SARKÖZY - (retd) Department of Applied Technology, University of Horticulture and the Food Industry;

- VIKTORIA SZIRMAI, PH.D. - Institute of Sociological Research, Hungarian Academy of Sciences;

- JANOS SZLAVIK, PH.D. - Department of Environment Conservation, Budapest Technical University;

- JANOS VARGHA - biologist, President and founding member of ISTER.

*The discussion was led by:*

- TAMAS FLEISCHER - engineer, economist, Vice-President and founding member of ISTER;

- PETER HARDI, PH.D. - Director of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

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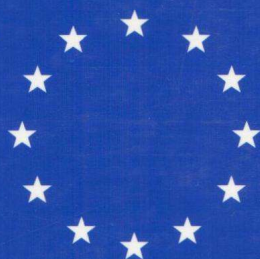
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