

Azerbaijan Faces Environmental Challenge

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A new ministry confronts a legacy of pollution and waste on land and at sea

Azerbaijan's environment ministry is winning praise for its efforts to deal with the country's numerous ecological problems, but its powers are limited.

The country is experiencing huge environmental problems caused by post-Soviet poverty, by its oil industry and by sudden wealth.

Wherever you look, there are serious problems. As one of the five countries bordering the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan has signed up to international programmes committing itself to fight pollution and stop sturgeon stocks dwindling further. On the coast, the Apsheron peninsula near to Baku is suffering the effects of oil pollution.

The capital Baku is currently experiencing a big construction boom, with a string of grand restaurant-buildings for wedding receptions being put up across the city. However, the owners of these new buildings frequently fail to install proper waste-disposal facilities. The same thing is happening with new sanatoria, whose sewage is being discharged into the sea.

Azerbaijan's ministry of the environment and natural resources was formed in 2001, out of five different state committees. With only a small budget from the treasury, the ministry has relied heavily on international grants, for instance in its successful programme to create five new national parks.

Environment minister Hussein Bagirov told IWPR in an interview that his job would be impossible if he was unable to draw on non-governmental organisations, NGOs, and mobilise the population at large.

"It's impossible to put the environment last on the list, and then demand fresh air, clean water and streets free of litter," he said. "I don't intend to absolve certain institutions from responsibility, but civil society should play the decisive role in the ambition to live in a healthy environment."

Samir Isayev, head of the environmental NGO Ekolex, said Bagirov's ministry had the reputation of being one of Azerbaijan's most open ministries and that it had won respect for its efforts.

"Until recently, there was practically no organisation that protected the environment - or else the body that did so was merely a branch office of one in Moscow," said Isayev. "In the Soviet era, ecology was a kind of fifth wheel which no one needed and only got whatever funds were left over. Given all this, the new ministry is coping very well with its mission."

Bagirov said protecting Azerbaijan's forests - which cover 11 per cent of its territory - was a priority and that while illegal felling was still continuing, the loggers were no longer operating so blatantly.

"Unfortunately, in 15 years of turmoil, people have got used to treating the forest in commercial fashion," the minister said. "In principle, we have been able to destroy an entire system, [although] the main players involved in logging are still trying to resist us."

Another priority is provision of clean drinking water for the public. Azerbaijan pledged, along with other countries at the United Nations Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development two years ago, to give its citizens clean water by the year 2015. The first stage of the ministry's plan involves installing water-filters in 50 Azerbaijan villages where drinking water is currently of poor qualities, and which share one tap between every 20 or 30 houses.

A World Bank-funded project is tackling the problem of dangerous and carcinogenic industrial emissions and substances such as mercury and asbestos.

Experts stress that all these daunting problems can only be overcome if there is public support. "Environmental problems will never be solved just by ministerial actions; a new concept of life, thought, culture and public behaviour has to evolve," said the minister.

Bagirov's call for greater involvement by the non-governmental sector is so far having only modest success. There are around 75 environmental NGOs in Azerbaijan, but only a third of them are active – a small number in a country with so many significant ecological problems.

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