

SOCIAL FACTORS AFFECTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN POLAND

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Abstract. This article presents the process that shaped society in Poland and whose important characteristic was to make it aware of the issues related to the ecological crisis. This process began at the end of World War II and symbolically ended when the “Polski Klub Ekologiczny” (PKE – Polish Ecological Club) was established, in 1980. This was the first public institution which monitored the condition of the natural environment. The PKE reports included an assessment of pro-ecological actions undertaken in Poland and suggested options to overcome the current threats to the environment. According to the author of this paper, the decisive moment in shaping the pro-ecological awareness of the public was the period of preparation and publication of the Brundtland Report, in 1987.

Keywords: Poland, ecological crisis, ecological awareness, sustainable development, the Brundtland Report, pro-ecological attitudes

INTRODUCTION

The need to take action to protect the environment is currently so obvious that nobody even tries to question it. Nevertheless, forty years ago, the situation in Poland was totally different because society’s ecological awareness was just starting to develop and, thus, the awareness regarding the threats to the natural environment was relatively limited. However, the process of transforming awareness in Polish society was not a consequence of deliberate educational activities but the result of spontaneous reactions from residents to local ecological threats. This process was recorded mainly in the archived press releases, which help us ascertain that it occurred in

parallel with the development of civil society. The completion of the transformation process of sensitising society's awareness occurred only with the collapse of the totalitarian system and the creation, in 1990, of an independent public centre for monitoring the state of the environment - the Institute for Sustainable Development. Its reports played a huge role in shaping ecological awareness in Polish society. Up to now, this event was not met with much interest by researchers. Therefore, the following article aims to identify the causes and social impact of the pro-ecological transformation in the conscience of Polish society.

1. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN POLAND AFTER WORLD WAR II

In the period of real socialism, protecting the environment was not of great interest to political authorities. They delegated this type of activity to social organisations such as: “Liga Ochrony Przyrody” (LOP – “The League for Nature Conservation”) and “Państwową Komisją Ochrony Przyrody” (PKOP – “The National Commission for Nature Conservation”). Until 1949, despite its official name, the PKOP was only a public advisory body of the Minister of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment, which was at that time responsible for environmental protection issues. These organisations published their own dedicated journals: *Chrońmy Przyrodę Ojczystą* (*Let's Protect Nature in our Motherland*), starting from 1945, and *Przyroda Polska* (*Nature in Poland*), from 1957. The merely advisory status of the institutions dealing with nature conservation meant that they had no real impact on economic and political decisions, so the authorities of the Polish People's Republic did not feel directly responsible for the state of the natural environment. In the official state documents, it is even difficult to find specific decisions regarding actions to improve the issues related to environmental protection. However, this does not mean that no action was taken. At the request of both LOP and PKOP, several national parks were opened, nature reserves were created to protect unique ecosystems,

different species of plants and animals were protected by law and closed seasons for game and fish were stipulated. From this information, it is not difficult to conclude that the problems of nature conservation were left to the experts, supported by ecology enthusiasts. However, in 1948, PKOP became one of the founding members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Thanks to LOP and PKOP initiatives, in June 1966, the first pro-ecological legislation “The Protection of the Atmosphere from Pollution Act” was passed (*Dziennik Ustaw* 1966, item 87).

In post-war Poland, free press did not exist and newspapers had strictly restricted access to information as well as limited possibilities of publishing it. Political authorities had the information monopoly, which was guaranteed by efficient censorship institutions. Therefore, the media could not fulfil the function of monitoring the actions of authorities. Specialised journals, including *Chrońmy Przyrodę Ojczyzny* (*Let's Protect Nature in our Motherland*) and *Aura*, in Kraków, although edited at a high level, only reached specialists. For various reasons, the authorities were not interested in providing the public with information on the state of the natural environment. This was mainly due to a lack of competent specialists within the public institutions and of habitual concern for the common good in society. Consequently, the state of the natural environment was not a subject of public debates. It resulted in a low level of public understanding related to ecological problems. Moreover, at the beginning of an intensive industrialisation period, the authorities were not interested in publicising information on the negative effects associated with it.

Based on the analysis of available press information, it seems that the breakthrough for shaping environmental awareness in Polish society was the process associated with the emergence of global pro-environmental regulations, which included, among others tasks, obligatory institutional ecologic education. The climax was the publication of the *Brundtland Report*, in 1987. For social science researchers, the reconstruction and systematisation of the

transformation of public conscience turned out to be extremely important responsibilities. All of this led to a systemic transformation in Poland. Ecology played an essential role in this regard. From the mere status of an academic discipline, it discreetly became part of everyday life, together with the hopes and fears that accompany contemporary society.

In-depth and long-term studies are required in order to track all the changes that have transformed the unfavourable state of affairs. Nevertheless, some of these points can be analysed based on reading daily newspapers and the dedicated journals that were published in Poland at that time. It turns out that Poland can be proud of some of its activities in the field of environmental protection. Fortunately, in Poland, there was never a shortage of people concerned about the state of the natural environment. But these enthusiasts did not have the opportunity to effectively transfer their fears into legislation. This state of affairs changed only after the Second World War, which, in addition to unimaginable material losses, also brought catastrophic consequences for the natural environment. Moreover, the relative political isolation of Poland associated with life behind the “Iron Curtain” was not conducive to keep the country up to date with global trends in the field of environmental protection. “There was almost no domestic production of equipment to reduce environmental pollution, and the lack of exchangeable currency was an obstacle to the purchase of such devices abroad. Investment expenditures in the environmental protection sector were at the level of 0.3-0.5% of national income, while material losses of society as a result of environmental pollution were estimated at 5-10% of national income” (*Polityka ekologiczna* 2008, 4). However, few people knew these facts.

In spite of this negligence, the Polish geologist and ecologist Valery Goetel (1889-1972) significantly contributed to the preparation of the UN Secretary-General U Thant’s report, dated 1969, which referred to the global condition of the natural environment. A year later, as a reaction to this speech, the authorities established the

Polish Committee for the Protection of the Human Environment. As an institution, it was no different from the existing LOP and PKOP type consultative bodies. However, it caused Polish experts to actively participate in creating a global legislation in environmental protection, as was in the case of the resolution concerning the human environment passed at the Stockholm Conference, on June 14, 1972. Article 12 of the Stockholm Declaration contains an important commitment from all European countries to make efforts to improve nature's condition. However, instead of a closer cooperation, it became an instrument used in ideological confrontations. It caused a lot of misunderstanding and became a convenient excuse for both sides to blame each other for not respecting the signed obligations.

2. A PRO-ECOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH IN AWARENESS OF POLISH SOCIETY

The passive attitudes of Polish society towards ecological problems prevailed until the accelerated intensive industrialisation, in the 1970s. Afterwards, the ecological problems related mainly to the expansion of chemical and mining industries escalated rapidly. Environmental protection by the public institutions was no longer enough. They did not even have access to mass media, which completely dominated the "propaganda of success". Additionally, journals published by the ecologists in low volumes did not make the task easy for them. Paradoxically, from today's perspective, the neighbours of Poland seemed to be more concerned with environmental problems than the Poles themselves. Therefore, no ecological awareness, however rudimentary, could be shaped in such conditions.

The change in the attitude of decision-makers to ecological problems was only initiated by the international relaxation in the 1970s, which culminated in signing the Final Act on Principles by the High Representatives of 35 participating states at the Conference on Se-

curity and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). This document, signed in Helsinki on August 1, 1975, defined not only the rules of conduct in international politics but also in all matters that concerned issues going beyond the competence of one state. Ecological threats, as they do not recognise any boundaries set by man, have, for obvious reasons, gained such status.

The Final Act contained an important statement: “The participating States, affirming that the protection and improvement of the environment, as well as the protection of nature and the rational utilisation of its resources in the interests of present and future generations, is one of the tasks of major importance to the well-being of peoples and the economic development of all countries and that many environmental problems, particularly in Europe, can be solved effectively only through close international cooperation” (Final Act 1975). Behind this general postulate, there was a commitment not to worsen the existing state of the environment, to conduct ecological education of children and youth and the rational exploitation of natural resources. The very fact that the resolutions of the so-called second CSCE basket were published in their entirety in Poland only five years after they were signed indicates that they were uncomfortable for the authorities.

Along with the publication of these documents, a new era related to environmental protection began in Poland. In 1980, a new law on environmental protection and development was passed, which this time did not stop to declarations, but established a new institution called “Państwowa Inspekcja Ochrony Środowiska” (PIOŚ – State Environmental Protection Inspectorate). It was competently subordinated to the Minister for Environmental Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry (Dziennik Ustaw 1980, item 6).

These laws did not solve the problems by themselves. In order for PIOŚ to be able to operate effectively, it had to have properly prepared personnel and monitoring equipment. It is not surprising that after five years from the implementation of the act on environmental protection there still were requests to equip the inspectors

with the necessary equipment so that they could carry out their tasks. The Office for Environmental Protection tried to shift the responsibility onto the companies who were not eager to pay for the purchase of expensive monitoring equipment (Panek 1985a, 4). Thus, in spite of the new legislation, everything remained unchanged. You can even get the impression the entire activity of the PIOS was limited exclusively to formulating the appropriate postulates. However, its reports already contained an important message, which indicated the emerging environmental awareness of Polish consumers.

This does not mean that the pro-environmental activities immediately gained many supporters. Some of the decisions at that time imposed financial burdens on companies related to the natural environment and met with resistance from both the management and staff. Thus, the authorities realised the necessity of gaining public support for such activities. Motivating local communities was not easy, and it also had unexpected results. Local protests were the consequence of spreading awareness, which, due to the ecological goal, could not be averted by force. The range of their social impact was very wide.

3. PRO-ECOLOGICAL ACCELERATION

The beginning of the 1980s did not bring radical changes in activities aimed at improving the state of the natural environment. At that time, Poland experienced a very turbulent period, initiated by the emergence of a social movement called *Solidarity* and attempts to carry out a limited scale modernisation of Polish society. Together with data on the Polish economy, certain data on the state of the natural environment were also disclosed. It can be assumed that it was only from this moment that it permanently entered in public debate. Not surprisingly, then, that the Environmental and Natural Resources Committee began to function later alongside the Solidarity Citizens' Committee. This social discourse, which included

environmental issues, was abruptly interrupted by the introduction of martial law, on December 13, 1981. Once again, the ecological issues ceased to be a priority for the authorities. At the same time, international cooperation in environmental protection also ceased. However, one of the few possibilities of maintaining international cooperation was fortunately on the ecological level. This ensured the participation of Polish experts in the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development, established in 1983, also known as the Brundtland Commission.

The Vienna Declaration of June 11, 1983, devoted to the policy of nature protection and environmental protection in Europe, claims that the ecological problems are closely related to political ones. In point 2 in this declaration, reference was made to CSCE arrangements, the World Charter for Nature, as well as to the World Strategy for Nature Conservation. The document also expressed concern about negligence in this matter, simultaneously obliging the European states to intensify their efforts (Stawiński 1985, 56-59). The economic slump in Poland at that time made this country one of the main targets of criticism for negligence. No wonder, then, that official propaganda tried to show that Poland did not deserve such criticism since environmental protection issues are of interest to the highest authorities.

1985 represented a breakthrough year for Polish society. Though food-related difficulties have not diminished, the authorities clearly sought legitimacy in the eyes of the West. Censorship was relaxed, which resulted in the introduction of regular articles in journals dedicated to environmental issues whilst the press itself initiated various forms of pro-ecological activities. A characteristic feature of this process was the reactivation of the governmental program for the development of the Vistula River. It was initiated in 1978 but this time was reduced to the sphere of nature protection. Starting from January, in the pages of the newspaper called *Trybuna Ludu*, information on ecological problems faced by cities and regions located along the river were periodically published. The journalists' visits

were concerned not only with local environmental protection achievements but also denounced the biggest polluters of the Vistula River, such as the chemical company Azoty in Puławy and Siarkopol in Tarnobrzeg. From these articles, it can be presumed that the denouncement by the press of the companies polluting the river was not intended to force radical changes relating to water protection from their directors, but it was a kind of record of the companies which cause harm to the environment. However, the action itself, in some way, sensitised the public. It undoubtedly resulted in a growing resistance to the expansion of companies polluting the environment, whilst the political authorities increasingly counted on international opinion as well as public opinion in Poland. The fight with asbestos became the flagship issue which, at that time, was also an opportunity to promote the authorities' commitment to nature conservation. The media campaign reflected the change of emphasis in favour of the environment. From then on, community health and the state of the natural environment were interlinked. No wonder, then, that the press editorial offices began to inform readers about the reactions of environmental polluters in their pro-ecological publications. However, the reasons for such negative events were often underestimated and the responsibility of those guilty of negligence minimised.

Also, the ruling party tried to keep up with the times and a special Commission for Population and Environment Health was established. It held meetings in regions where the state of the natural environment was of the greatest concern, as was the case in Legnica, the centre of the copper industry (see e.g. *Trybuna Ludu* 1984, 1). This was to show the public that environmental protection was of great importance to the ruling party. The State Council, which was the highest formal authority, also tried to demonstrate its activity in the sphere of nature protection. To this end, a special Commission for Environmental Protection was created, which inaugurated its activities on January 12, 1987 (Rzeczpospolita 1987a, 1, 5). However, this did not change the fact that the local self-government bodies

basically did not show any activity in protecting the natural environment until the publication of the Brundtland Report. From the second half of 1987, the increased activity of national councils at all levels was unable to change this negative impression.

Nevertheless, there were also positive examples of changes caused by the new pro-ecological legislation. Of course, they were immediately mentioned in the press (Wrzask 1987, 7). In accordance with the Helsinki agreements, ecological education programs for children and youth were started in Poland (Panek 1985b, 3). In this case, the education authorities kept pace with global trends.

After the publication of the Brundtland Report, the government's press organ "Rzeczpospolita" started printing a daily column entitled "Przyroda pod szczególną ochroną" (*Nature under Special Protection*). The scattered articles on ecological topics began to appear in one place (Rzeczpospolita 1987c, 4; 1987d, 4). An interesting propaganda tool was to put Polish environmental threats in a broader context, e.g. in the European one. Then, the local Polish threats became in a sense continental and sometimes even global problems. This somehow transferred the responsibility for the adverse condition of the environment from the administrative and political decision makers to unspecified objective factors.

The rivalry between the East and the West was also conducted on the ecological level. The richer neighbours did not spare criticism for the countries with so-called real socialism for neglecting the environment. Due to the economic slump in the East, this rivalry was only undertaken on an ideological level. In the Polish press, an exaggerated image of the problems that occurred on the other side of the River Elbe, in the sphere of environmental protection, were presented.

Finally, information about local social initiatives aimed at improving the natural environment began to appear in the national press. Not only have the political and administrative authorities expressed concerns about nature's condition but also the inhabitants themselves. This change was probably due to a significant increase

in the importance of the ecological movements in the West. This way it was intended to show that the situation was similar in Poland. One of the first public initiatives of this kind was the Public Committee for the Protection of Masurian Lakes, which was established in June 1984. Regardless, the authorities of individual voivodships sought to involve broad sections of society in activities aimed at improving the local natural environment. There was particularly a lot to do in Silesia and, thus, the first initiatives were born there (Rzeczpospolita 1987b, 3).

This state of affairs was a sign of change in the way of thinking. The content of the Brundtland Report made the world be treated as a common good. This was noticeable also in Poland, on the basis of press information. It is true that we cannot attribute breakthrough significance to an individual event. But this event was part of a series which ultimately established the new world order. This order is not perfect, because of unresolved issues related to people's migration, which appear to us as a threat on a scale no less than the ecological crisis.

When the Brundtland Report was published in Poland, it was not known under this name and, in a certain sense, it was even ignored¹. Only experts had access to its details. Then, it broke away with such an approach, as it was an offer that everyone can benefit from according to their capabilities. However, it is difficult to explain, from today's perspective, the general situation at the moment of its publication. In Poland, the report produced a marked decrepitude in the press debates on ecological problems. But this was no longer able to destroy the positive achievements in environmental protection. In local and even national press, reports about public protests related to industrial plans harmful to both the environment and residents started soon to appear. From that moment, representatives from the whole of society, as well as from regions that were not formally included in the ecological crisis, begun to participate in the ongoing debates.

CONCLUSION

The years that passed since the publication of the Brundtland Report have not brought a radical improvement to the current situation. The ecological threats have not been eliminated. The interlinking of ecological and political problems created a new level of confrontation between the East and the West. Paradoxically, this war could not have been won. However, failure meant not only sensitising society to ecological problems but also forced the authorities to intensify their efforts to improve the condition of the environment. It was not an accident that public protests caused the abandonment of the construction of the nuclear power plant in Żarnowiec. It is obvious that the Chernobyl disaster, in 1986, had the biggest impact on this decision, but the demonstrations and other forms of protest showed that society regained its political individuality. The publication of the Brundtland Report was thus a landmark in the process of transforming the European political scene. These changes were, in a sense, inevitable and there was no way of stopping them. The ultimate victory was and is the Polish public, who only then gained environmental awareness. Today, we live in a completely different world. We do not experience so much the effects of the ecological crisis, and thus the struggle for a clean environment takes place in much more subtle forms. In this regard, Poland can be a model for the countries that are currently in the same situation as it was in the mid-1980s. Thus, the Polish people have both the right and duty to enforce at least the same commitment to eliminate the environmental threats as it was taken at that time.

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Notes:

1. The report wasn't published in Polish until 1991 - "Our Common Future: Report by the World Commission for Environment and Development", translated by. U. Grzelońska and E. Kolanowska. Warsaw: PWE, 1991.