

ENVSEC Programme in the Southern Caucasus



In the Southern Caucasus, a region which continues to be divided by protracted conflicts, environmental degradation and transboundary natural resources are potential sources of conflict as well as opportunities for cooperation. Following national consultations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in 2004, ENVSEC partners have developed a work programme around four main priority clusters identified by national governments:

- Environmental degradation and access to natural resources in conflict zones.
- Management of trans-boundary natural resources including water resources, areas prone to natural disasters such as floods and landslides, and areas affected by Soviet-era industrial and military complexes.
- Rapid population growth in capitals and unmanaged development in urban centers.
- Cross-cutting issues including public environmental awareness and strengthening of media reporting on critical environmental issues.

Assessing the environment in conflict zones:

Building cooperation to combat environmental degradation in conflict zones is a key focus for the ENVSEC Initiative in the South Caucasus. Prior to the recent conflict in Georgia in August, 2008, ENVSEC had worked to open public environmental information centres as well as to facilitate joint Georgian-Ossetian environmental assessments on wastewater treatment, irrigation infrastructure, solid waste management, and forest management in South Ossetia. The events of this past summer made these efforts unrealizable. However, following the events in August, ENVSEC helped to sponsor a joint OSCE-UNEP assessment mission of the environmental impacts of the conflict in Georgia, particularly focusing on forest fires in the area of the Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park and the areas adjacent to South Ossetia. The Mission's Report provides a number of recommendations on regional forest fire management which have been submitted to ENVSEC for approval.

Monitoring and protecting trans-boundary natural resources:

ENVSEC supports the improvement of management of the Kura-Araks/Aras river basin, the main source of fresh water in the Southern Caucasus. In its 6th and final year, the NATO/OSCE South Caucasus River Monitoring Project has built a transboundary water monitoring and data-sharing system between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. ENVSEC is now supporting new efforts by UNDP/GEF and UNECE to build institutional and legal frameworks for trans-boundary water agreements. In addition, UNEP is leading efforts in 2008-9 to build cooperation between the South Caucasus countries on protecting mountain habitats in the region.

Relieving urban environment pressures:

ENVSEC is building capacities within ministries of environment and local mayors' offices to effectively deal with rapid modernization of urban centers. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) methodology was introduced to the Yerevan City Administration in 2005 and UNDP will conduct a similar training program with the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan in 2008-9.

Promoting public environmental awareness and participation in decision-making:

ENVSEC, in cooperation with the ministries of environment of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, has supported the establishment of public environmental information centers (Aarhus centers) with the aim of providing environmental information and promoting public participation in decision-making. During 2008-9, new regional projects will bring Aarhus managers and civil society representatives of each country to share and promote best practices from the region.