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BARRIERS FOR LOCAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN POLISH COMMUNES: INSIGHTS FROM THE LUBELSKIE VOIVODESHIP

BARIERY DLA LOKALNEGO ROZWOJU ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO W POLSKICH GMINACH: SPOSTRZEŻENIA Z WOJEWÓDZTWA LUBELSKIEGO

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Summary: The purpose of the study is the identification of the limitations which may concern local sustainable development and resulting from the previous scale and directions of activities taken by local self-governments in the scope of protection and use of natural resources. By the example of the group of 49 mayors from the Lubelskie Voivodeship it has been found that the engagement of local authorities in activities contributing to an environment-friendly development in their communes was rather limited. In many cases, there is no reliable identification of existing natural potential and the local authorities are not ready to allocate the funds for various objectives associated with environment protection. The number of officials with the education enabling them to make the right decisions is usually very limited. Another problem is the still recognizable tendency to issue environmental decisions without a previous assessment of the investment impact on the environment.

Keywords: management, commune, nature protection.

Streszczenie: Celem pracy jest identyfikacja ograniczeń jakie mogą dotyczyć rozwoju zrównoważonego na poziomie lokalnym, a wynikających z dotychczasowej skali i kierunków działań podejmowanych przez samorządy lokalne w obszarze ochrony i użytkowania zasobów przyrodniczych. Na przykładzie grupy 49 wójtów z województwa lubelskiego stwierdzono, że władze gminne angażowały się w niewielkim stopniu w działania służące przyjaznemu środowisku rozwojowi podległych sobie obszarów. W wielu przypadkach nie zadbano o rzetelne rozpoznanie występującego potencjału przyrodniczego, samorządy w niewielkim stopniu są również skłonne do kierowania środków na różne cele związane z ochroną przyrody. W urzędach pracuje zazwyczaj bardzo ograniczona liczba osób z wykształceniem odpowiednim dla podejmowania odpowiednich decyzji. Problemem jest wciąż dająca się zaobserwować tendencja do wydawania decyzji środowiskowych bez przeprowadzenia poprzedniej oceny oddziaływania inwestycji na środowisko.

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie, gmina, ochrona przyrody.

1. Introduction

The new legal regulations introduced in the scope of environment protection linked with EU integration have created new difficult tasks for local self-government units. Therefore the new obligations have been imposed onto local authorities as a result of the necessity to adhere to protection principles and the need for the proper qualifications of officials in the scope of the widely interpreted environment and nature protection; also giving more importance to their sensitivity to the issues associated with counteraction against natural environment degradation. In such new conditions, without an adequate positive reaction of the local self-government to such requirements, the improvement of economic and social indicators in a local scale can be difficult or harmful for the natural environment, which is in contradiction to the idea of sustainable development. Although the concept of sustainable development is becoming the subject of interest of an increasing number of authors publishing their articles in scientific journals, the problem of the impact of lower-level local government on the state and the possibilities of protecting local natural resources are not taken up too often. Similarly, only in relatively few works do the authors consider the effects of actions taken by local governments in this area on directions of local development.

The goal of the paper is to identify the potential limitations for local sustainable development resulting from the involvement of local government in the protection of valuable natural resources. The theoretical part briefly reviews the literature discussing some forms of activity of local authorities relevant from the point of view of the issues discussed. Its empirical part contains the presentation of the results of a questionnaire survey carried out on the group of mayors of communes situated in the Lubelskie Voivodeship.

2. Literature review

For some time the interaction between economic development and natural environment condition has been seen in scientific literature. Increased interest in ecology and in the sustainable development concept intensified at the beginning of this century has contributed a great deal to this. In the foreign literature of that period, the idea of sustainable development itself was discussed emphasizing, among others, its three aspects i.e. economic, social and ecological, as well as defining the role of local authorities in its implementation (e.g. [Harris 2000; Kates et al. 2005; OECD 2002]). It was emphasized that subregional governments in some countries have the right to issue and to implement their own regulations by virtue of applicable national regulations in the scope of environmental protection (e.g. Spain). However, in other countries the local self-government authorities are authorized only to implement the regulations issued at central level (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Italy, Japan, and Poland [Mazur 2011, pp.11-12]). Some studies discuss the decentralization issue in the scope

of environment resources management. For example, in a study published by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency one can read that this process led to the improved quality of managing this in some developing countries, and in other countries it was possible only to partially implement the new solutions imposing increased responsibility for the environment onto lower level authorities due to an insufficient information campaign, the lack of training and of proper financing [Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2012, p. 28]. In the study published by S. Wild River, one can read about the financing of environmental expenditure by local authorities in Australia. The author emphasized the fact that such expenditure at the lowest self-government level constitutes the highest percentage of total expenditure in comparison with the analogical indicator for state authorities and central government. The author also raised other questions associated with environment management in Australian conditions, for example the limited capabilities of self-governments in the scope of the protection of natural values in the face of pressure from private investors (developers) because such investors, in cases of being refused a building permit or the necessity of compliance with stringent conditions imposed by local authorities, often successfully appeal in courts, tribunals or ministries [Wild River 2006, pp. 15, 19-20]. The issue of conflict between local development and nature protection was raised in the study by E. Falleth and S. Hovik. On the basis of research in the scope of methods of administering by self-governments in the territory of two large protected areas in Norway, the authors demonstrated the weakness of local institutions in the field of protection policy. It was found that, in this case, self-government officials used their political power mainly for the achievement of local economic and political goals and not for the implementation of protection principles. Such a situation was also the reason for social conflicts [Falleth, Hovik 2009, pp. 229-230].

S. Kozłowski is among the Polish trendsetters in ecological thinking in the local development context who, a few years after the publication of the famous report by Brundtland, wrote about issues associated with eco-development [Kozłowski 1994]. He was one of the first authors who, jointly with K. Wojciechowski, considering the issue of the Natura 2000 network implementation in Poland, expressed the opinion that local self-governments may be unable to perform the task in the scope of proper communes management without a negative impact on protected areas [Kozłowski, Wojciechowski 2006]. Empirical research on nature protection requirements in pro-development activities is often focused on the effects of the presence of European Ecological Network areas. In some studies the authors concluded that the potential impact of protected areas on local development is negatively perceived by many heads of communes in Poland, among others due to possible investment limitations and the opportunity for the improvement of environmental conditions observed by a relatively small percentage of commune administrators (among others [Bołtomiuk, Zagórski 2011; Mickiewicz, Gotkiewicz 2010]). However, sometimes it is possible to observe changes of attitudes in this scope and the gradually increasing acceptance

for the new forms of protection (e.g. [Tarchalska 2008]). D. Guzal-Dec presenting the results of analysis carried out in 30 communes in the Lubelskie Voivodeship characterized by essential ecological values, wrote about the wider issue associated with the conditions for the implementation of a sustainable development process to be created by commune self-governments. In the conclusion, the author states that, in the group of respondents, the self-governments mainly focused on ecological policy and their support for pro-ecological enterprises was insufficient and not favourable for the improvement of the natural competitiveness of communes [Guzal-Dec 2016, p. 92]. In the context of subject of this paper, it is also worth referring also to the report issued by the Supreme Chamber of Control (NIK) "Local forms of nature protection" written after the inspection in a selected group of offices in 2017. From the report it appears that in the entities subjected to inspection, more than 70% of forms of local protection were functioning on the basis of legal acts not conforming to applicable requirements and containing invalid data. However in 90% of communes no activities were taken in order to adopt resolutions adapting such acts to the existing legal and actual conditions. In the above report one can also read that in almost all communes, despite the appointment of persons or functions in the offices responsible for the issuing of protection forms, no principles, standards or procedures have been established in order to implement the protection of naturally valuable objects and that no periodical inspection of their condition were carried out [Najwyższa Izba Kontroli 2018].

In some publications, attention is drawn to the fact that despite the constraints of protection, normal business activities may be developed. For example, A. Zielińska states that there are opportunities for the development of environmentally friendly types of activities such as eco-agrotourism, ecological agriculture, sustainable forestry, natural medicine and health resorts (sanatorium) medical treatment as well as the manufacture of souvenirs, and handicrafts [Zielińska 2014, pp. 160-161]. Szramka and Zębek emphasize on the other hand that in cases of unfavourable impact, the entities are required to carry out an environment assessment and to redress potential damages e.g. within the framework of natural compensation [Szramka, Zębek 2013, p. 197].

Some authors also refer to spatial planning issues. As W. Gorzym-Wilkowski points out, for the preservation of special natural values it is important that local development plans take into account: use of land and principles of development thereof, principles of protection and shaping of spatial order, principles of environment, nature and cultural landscape protection, principles of shaping of buildings and land development indicators (e.g. maximum height of buildings, overall dimensions of objects), and the special conditions of land development and limitations of their use [Gorzym-Wilkowski 2016, p. 119]. However, as can be seen read in another paper, the number of these plans per administrative unit in Poland is usually insufficient and, consequently, poor planning coverage is found [Prus 2012]. In order to ensure the fulfilment of the role of local development plans and

the supplementing eco-physiographic studies, it is necessary to thoroughly identify the values occurring in the specified area on the basis of credible natural stocktaking which contains knowledge of the environment on local scale. K. Koreleski notes that natural stocktaking should encompass the diagnosis of environmental resources, characteristics of its resistance to anthropo-pressure as well as the assessment of the transformations status [Koreleski 2009, pp. 38-39].

More and more space in publications is devoted to the issue of funded support of environmental protection by local governments. It is worth mentioning that public levies, including self-government taxes, are increasingly often classified in source literature as economic instruments directly contributing to the protection of valuable natural resources. In addition to the aforementioned publication from Australia, one can also cite examples of Polish works. According to A. Wasiuta the economic instruments are in practice much more flexible than other environment protection tools because it is possible to adapt them to new circumstance more easily and quickly than to change legal acts and executory orders [Wasiuta 2015, p. 227]. The local self-government units in Polish communes perform the role of tax authority in the case of certain types of taxes (agricultural, forest, tax on transport means, and property). As noted by J. Witkowski, regardless of certain possibilities of exemptions and reliefs in the scope of the above taxes already included in the relevant legal acts regarding various actions favourable for natural environment, the legislator granted the right of additional decision-making in this aspect to commune authorities (commune councils) [Witkowski 2018, p. 29].

3. Methodology, aim and subject of the study

In 2018 and 2019, research was carried out by means of a diagnostic questionnaire survey. The questionnaire contained 34 closed questions, in some of them it was possible to choose more than one answer. All points in the questionnaire concerned the topic of broadly understood environmental resource management.

The research sample consisted of a group of mayors 49 from communes located in the lubelskie voivodeship in the south-eastern part of Poland. This region is characterized by a relatively low level of industrialization, and the presence of numerous legally protected areas and objects. All municipalities covered by the survey (with the exception of three communes) have this type of values within their borders, within which 29 units are areas of the European ecological network Natura 2000. Therefore, the obtained answers become the basis for formulating conclusions on how the analyzed self-governments take into account in their activities and decisions the restrictions applicable to these legal forms of protection and their protective functions.

The aim of the study was to identify threats to local sustainable development related to the way in which local governments comply with environmental protection requirements in their activities and decisions. The subject of the study was: the attitude

of municipal authorities to the issue of nature protection, the planning instruments used (development plans, environmental inventory), financing environmental projects, the frequency of carrying out environmental impact assessments and the preparation of clerical staff. In particular, the following research questions were raised:

- what is the attitude of self-government authorities at commune level towards legally protected areas and the opportunity to use their presence for local development needs?
- are the limitations associated with nature protection sufficiently considered in the basic planning documents in communes?
- whether and how are commune authorities financially engaged in supporting pro-ecological activity?
- what is the approach of self-governments towards the issue of assessments of impact on the environment?
- are the staff of commune officials prepared for the performance of tasks focused on sustainable development?

For research needs it was assumed that the previous activity of commune self-governments related to the management of natural resources may lead to problems in the course of the performance of tasks oriented towards the environmentally friendly social and economic development of communes.

4. The results of research carried out in the group of mayors in the Lubelskie Voivodeship

The attitude of local authorities towards environment protection and the resulting obvious limitations is of key importance for the scale and methods of environment elements used for the achievement of the essential objectives of communes. In several parts of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked for their opinions and real activities indicating their approach to this problem. The answer to the question whether the location of naturally valuable areas in the territory of commune could be favourable for its development was “rather yes” (28 heads of communes) and additionally 2 persons answered “definitely yes” – meaning that the total percentage of positive answers was 61%. Further 9 indications (18%), were associated with the option “does not affect”. Another question was whether the increase of surface area encompassed by territorial nature protection would be accepted by self-government. In this case, a positive opinion was expressed by a smaller number of respondents (21 – 43% of answers). First of all, the self-governments would like to develop tourism on the basis of existing legally protected areas (35 indications – 71%) and, in the second instance, to build marketing image of their communes (23 indications – 47%) and therefore to raise external funds (20 indications – 41%) and to motivate the local community for the greater care of environment condition (20 indications – 41% of the provided answers). In 41 cases, the commune heads declared, in answer

to relevant questions, that the document containing the basic and valid assumptions for commune development also includes the provisions concerning the direct use of natural values for this purpose.

In the questionnaire, the respondents were requested to select from the presented list the types of undertakings financed or co-financed in the greatest degree during the past 10 years from the funds controlled by self-governments. The answers were as follows: road infrastructure– 49 (100% respondents), water supply and sewage systems – 45 (92%), renewable energy sources – 43 (88%), public utility sector (schools, health service etc. – 42 (86%), waste water treatment – 34 (69%), tourism infrastructure – 23 (47%), contamination emissions reduction – 20 (41%), waste storage/ neutralization – 16 (33%), direct actions contributing to the protection of local natural resources – 12 (24%). Among the expenditure directly contributing to environment and landscape protection, the officials most frequently indicated as the goal: ecological education (69% of those questioned) and, in the second instance, planting of trees and hedges, afforestation (51%), financing of research, experts opinions, publications, conferences (22%) and finally, the creation and functioning of naturally valuable objects and areas (10%) (Figure 1). On the basis of the obtained results it was also found that in approximately every fifth commune covered by the research, there had been no such expenditure over the last decade. More than half of all respondents declared that they do not plan to increase their expenditures for the above activities in the near future. It appears from the questionnaires that the self-governments do not want to financially support such behaviour of private entities as the exclusions of a part of the land from the normal activity for protection purposes, the development of services related to ecological tourism as well as the popularization of knowledge about natural landscape values.

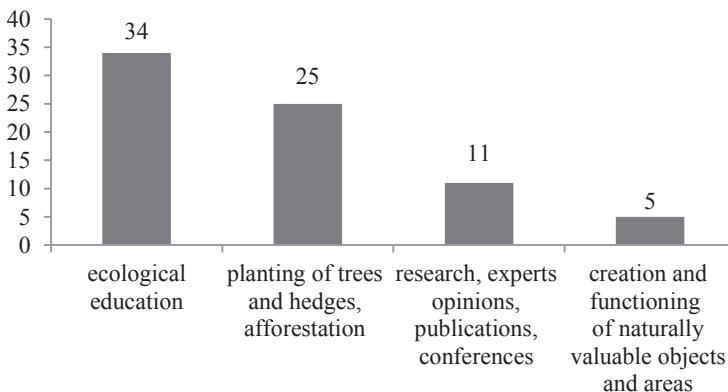


Fig. 1. Types of projects financed or co-financed by local governments by the number of indications

Source: own study.

All the self-governments represented by the respondents implement the objectives and tasks determined in the commune development strategy as well as, in accordance with the applicable statutory requirements, the activities of each entity should be based on the assumptions determined in the study of the conditions and directions of the spatial management. However, it is possible to observe a clear diversification of the time of its preparation and implementation. On the basis of the obtained answers, one can find that relatively new documents constitute the greatest percentage because they were created during the last 5 years (22 indications – 45% of total number). However, the number of indications concerning the earliest documents, created more than 15 years ago (i.e. before the adoption of the Environment Protection Act in 2004 and the determination of Natura 2000 Network areas in Poland) is only slightly lower (Figure 2). Furthermore, as declared by the commune heads, any eco-individual development plan is not implemented in any commune encompassed by the research. As transpires from the questionnaire, no natural stocktaking has ever been carried out in almost 25% of communes included in the research (14 communes), and such specific investigation of environment resources status in the remaining communes mostly took place more than 10 years ago (21 from among 35 communes).

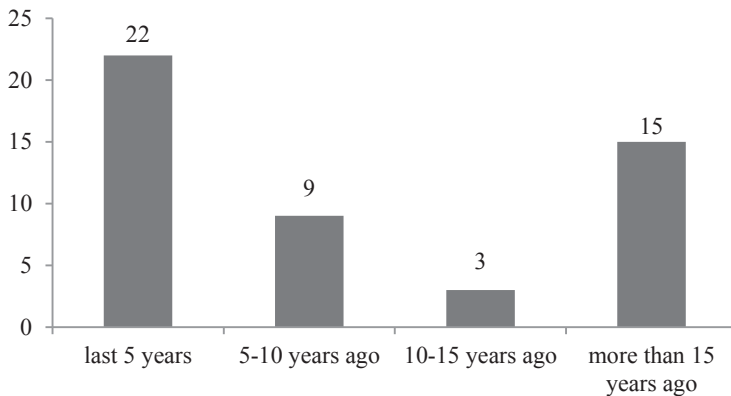


Fig. 2. Time of making the study of conditions and directions of spatial development by the number of communes

Source: own study.

Pursuant to the act issued in 2008, the mayors and presidents of towns play a key role as decision-making authorities in the process of issuance of environmental decisions in the majority of the considered projects (in particular in rural areas). Therefore most frequently it is the commune office which determines whether the assessment of the impact on the environment, as well as the scale of such assessment and the scope of the report constituting its integral part and submitted in such cases by the potential investor (a report on the impact on the environment) should

be carried out. It is worth mentioning that the commune's executive authority also has influence on the process of the assessment of the impact on the Natura 2000 protected area, This is because the regional director for environmental protection can be requested by the commune's executive authority, on their own initiative, to agree the conditions of project implementation, when it will be found if such an impact is possible [The Act of 3rd October 2008]. The problem of decision-making on the execution of the assessment of investment impact on the environment was one of the research issues. The participants of the research were given the opportunity to estimate its frequency through the choice of one option from among several proposed ones. The option of "rarely issued" decision (25 indications, i.e. 51% of their total number). The number of respondents indicating the variant with "frequently issued" decision (19 i.e. 39%) was slightly smaller. However, definitely the smallest number of indications was associated with the answers that the decision is "issued always" (5 i.e. 10%). It is interesting that a similar distribution of answers occurred in a smaller group of commune heads representing communes with existing Natura 2000 areas (there are 28 such communes considered in the analysis and they belong to a wider group of 49 entities covered by the research; the relevant indicators were 57%, 39% and 4% correspondingly). It is worth mentioning that the above-mentioned opportunity to qualify the investment projects submitted to the commune office as projects affecting the protected Natura 2000 areas, were used "rarely or never" – in light of the obtained results.

The issue of actions taken in connection with the presence of the European Ecological Network areas and with the necessity to implement the plans of their protection was also considered in the questionnaire. Generally, in the case of the delimitation of one or more such areas, local officials were not motivated to take any new additional tasks in the scope of environment management and local development. From among 29 commune heads concerned, 24% of respondents (7 persons) pointed to the modification of local development plans as the action taken directly due to the influence of a new protection form. The action consisting in the gradual introduction of solutions encouraging the private owners to enforce protection plans was selected by every seventh commune head (4 persons) asked. The largest number of respondents (approximately 50%) stated that no actions had been taken in their communes during the last decade. The poor level of engagement can be caused, among others, by insufficient knowledge about the plans of Natura 2000 areas protection being created or already implemented, because the questionnaires show that 15 of the 28 commune heads did not express their opinion about the results of the consultations associated with such plans evaluated with regard to the interests of local communities. Apparently, this is not a factor slowing down the investment activeness of self-governments because, in accordance with the answers provided in the questionnaire, the self-government investments were carried out in more than 50% of communes.

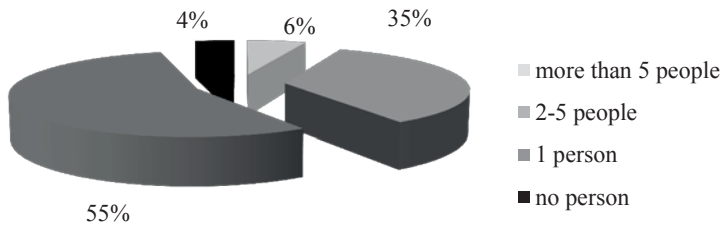


Fig. 3. The share of communes with a certain number of employees with education in life science or environmental protection, or employees who underwent such training

Source: own study.

The questionnaire also contained questions about the number of employees with education in the scope of life science or environmental protection, or employees who underwent training in this aspect, and about the functioning of the department or analogical organizational unit carrying out day – to – day work in the field of natural resources protection. In the first case, the respondents indicated almost exclusively the variant of “one person with the aforementioned education” followed by “between 2 and 5 persons” (Figure 3). The existence of a competent organizational unit in their offices was confirmed by 25 commune heads (51% of all respondents). From the research it appears that the persons acting as the commune office managers mainly would like to delegate their employees to training in the area of renewable energy sources in the commune (40 indications – 82% of the total number of respondents) as well as in planning and the implementation of sustainable development policy (16 indications – 33%). However, every third respondent saw the need for raising qualifications concerning biodiversity protection (16 persons) and every eighth respondent – in the field of natural compensation – extremely important in the impact assessment (6 persons). The respondents were also asked for their opinion about the transparency of applicable laws regarding the rights and duties of commune self-governments concerning the environment and nature protection. The above laws were found to be sufficiently clearly formulated (30 indications – 61%) by the majority of the respondents, whilst the opinion of the remaining group was negative, and only 4 persons (8% of answers) in this group were convinced.

5. Conclusions

The development of communes should be managed by their self-governments in a manner enabling the use and, simultaneously, the protection of local natural resources. Based on the example of selected communes in the Lubelskie Voivodeship, it is possible to find that there are certain dangers for a future compromise between the economic and social, as well as the ecological objectives associated with local development. The most important conclusions which can be drawn are as follows:

1. In general, self-governments declare their readiness for pro-ecological exploitation of natural resources. This fact might point to certain evolution and change of negative attitudes towards the areas subjected to protective regimes which are de-stimulating factors for a commune development, as described by the authors mentioned previously [Bołtromiuk, Zagórski 2011; Mickiewicz, Gotkiewicz 2010]. Some self-government officials would like to use the legal forms of protection for the development of environmentally-friendly forms of activity mentioned by Zielińska [2014]. However, from the analysis it appears that, despite the positive approach declared by the majority of respondents, this is not accompanied by the proper financing level for this type of activity which confirms the results of research carried out a few years ago by Guzal-Dec [2016]. Furthermore, the local authorities do not use economic instruments in the scope of environmental resources management despite the fact that such opportunities are available in the opinion of Wasiuta, and should be seriously taken in the present circumstances [Wasiuta 2015].

2. Many self-governments have not carried out any natural stocktaking in their communes or such stocktaking took place more than 10 years ago. This means that the guidelines introduced by the Act of 9th October 2015 [Act of 9th October 2015] were not considered in its preparation. The reasons for the underestimation of natural values (including the protected areas), additionally include the fact that in some self-government entities, the study of the conditions and directions of the spatial management was adopted before the introduction of essential changes in the Polish system of nature protection (e.g. the Act issued in 2004, the implementation of the Natura 2000 Network). In these conditions, in many cases this document might not contain any provisions which are important in view of nature conservation goals. However, such need is stressed by e.g. Gorzym-Wilkowski [Gorzym-Wilkowski 2016].

3. The issuance of the decision on carrying out environmental impact assessments by commune offices is still not a rule, this also includes communes with Natura 2000 protected areas in their territory. This situation may unfavourably affect the sustainable development of communes if only because there are limited possibilities of performing environmental compensation, the importance of which is emphasized by Szramka and Zębek [Szramka, Zębek 2013]. Furthermore, mayors extremely rarely consider the possibility of the impact of projects located outside of the protected area on its condition and protective functions, and have taken only a limited number of actions contributing to the effectiveness of the protection itself. At the same time, investment activity was or is carried out by some self-governments within the borders of Natura 2000 areas.

4. Almost as a rule, the issues directly affecting the condition of the local environment are entrusted to one person, often without proper subject matter preparation. The poor preparation of the commune officials for managing the necessity of respecting applicable protective regimes, as well as the limited readiness of communes managing personnel to delegate their officials to training in the scope more closely associated with natural resources protection (e.g. natural compensation)

are in line with what is stated in the SEPA report [Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2012]. This may lead to extremely conservative decisions and actions of self-governments, or to the excessive and consequently harmful for environment exploitation of local natural values in the near future. In the latter case this would mean the primacy of economic goals over ecology (see e.g. [Falleth, Hovik 2009]).

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