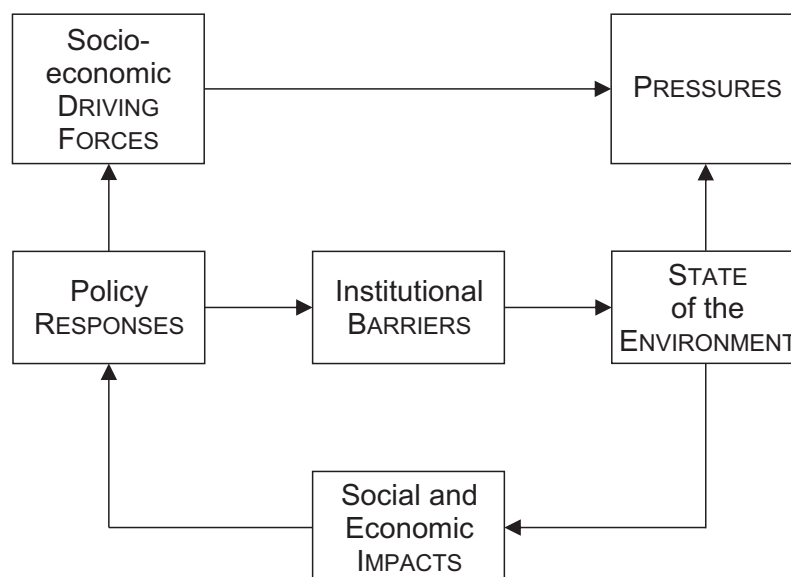


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Local governance and environmental sustainability: a case study from North-Eastern Bulgaria

A study based on the data collected through the access to information module was performed with the aim to explore the linkages between good governance and the quality of the environment. The interaction between natural and social systems is analysed through the framework of Driving forces – Pressures – State – Impacts – Responses (DPSIR). It enables to trace the links between social phenomena exerting pressure on the environment (Driving forces); stresses that human activities place on the environment (Pressures); the condition of the environment (State); consequences from environmental degradation including economic costs (Impacts) and available policy responses. This approach is modified through the introduction of institutional barriers in the DPSIR model, in order to achieve a more realistic picture of the interaction between societal forces and nature.



DPSIR framework with institutional barriers

Institutional barriers are rules and procedures that hinder the achievement of objectives and policies. In order to improve the state of the environment, a lowering of these barriers is required, which entails changes in the rules and organisational culture of institutions. Thus the quality of governance is very important in dismantling existing institutional roadblocks for the proper implementation of responses to environmental issues.

The aim of the research is to test empirically the correlation between good governance and environmental sustainability. The study includes description of the elements of good governance and the existing approaches to its measurement, as well as the existing approaches to the design of sustainable development indicators. It focuses on the local level of decision making and policy implementation. The paper outlines the methodological approaches to measuring governance at the level of local authorities, since they are responsible both for the well-being of communities and shape the micro-environment for business. While local authorities have limited impact on global environmental issues, their role in sustaining and protecting local commons is often crucial. The interdependence between good governance and the state of the local environment is examined through a study of local authorities in North-Eastern Bulgaria.

All 49 municipalities in the project region are explored. The preliminary results point out at a strong relationship between the quality of local governance and the approach to resolving outstanding issues, such as water supply and sanitation, waste management and reduction of air pollution or noise. Wherever there are transparent, accountable and efficient local authorities, environmental problems tend to be less acute and there is a clear vision how to respond to long-term pressures in a sustainable way. In municipalities with low administrative capacity, higher levels of perceived corruption and untransparent decision-making environmental problems have as a rule low priority, only basic services are provided by the local authorities, and there is no strategic approach to improving the quality of the natural environment.

As a follow-up of the project a ranking of the quality of local governance and of environmental sustainability, based on the collected data will be published. It will serve as a benchmark for the local authorities in North-Eastern Bulgaria. The relationship between governance and the state of the environment at local level clearly reveals the importance of transparency and accountability in the work of municipalities for improving the well-being of communities.