

### **Creating Environmental Awareness in Azerbaijan**

The outburst of social activity at the beginning of 1990, the establishment of numerous national democratic organizations and movements conditioned by the political crisis in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) were focused on solving the problem of the sovereignty of the former Soviet Republics. Democratization and Glasnost, as well as a progressive openness in society became the main factors of national renewal. Under their influence in the Republic, fundamentally new social and political conditions have been formed and all social processes have intensified.

The escalation of the conflict over the territory of Nagorno Karabakh has resulted in an acceleration of inflation, an aggravation of the economic crisis, as well as the appearance of insoluble social problems (presence of more than one million IDP's). The growth in social discontent and the necessity to find a way out of the social political crisis, which brought the Republic to the verge of civil war, ended in recognition by the whole nation of Heydar Aliyev as a national political leader, who has great practical experience and high political prestige in the world. The election of Heydar Aliyev as the President of the Azerbaijan Republic and the formation through democratic elections in 1995 of a new Parliament Milli Mejlis, marked the end of the first stage of the restoration of Azerbaijan's independence and statehood.

Among the most remarkable and important phenomena observed recently in the public conscience, is the increase in interest in environmental issues, and the expansion of the social basis of advocates for the ecologically sound development of the country. The policy of glasnost and openness pursued by the State Committee for the Environment, has contributed to the increase in the public's environmental knowledge and an understanding of the acuteness and seriousness of the Republic's ecological problems. Under the conditions of democratic society, old forms of social organizations, such as the Environmental Protection Society, which was established in the 1960's and has been actively functioning since then, and which was adequate for the Communist Regime of that time, has turned out to be outdated and incapable of rapid restructuring, and it has therefore lost its leading position.

Concern over serious ecological problems and clear discontent expressed by the general public over the insufficiency of measures taken for the normalization of the ecological situation in the Republic, as well as a demand for more intensive actions, were an impetus for the activation of existing public organizations and structures for the protection of the environment and the establishment of new ones.

In the process of building an ecological mentality in the society during this period, an important role has been played by public ecological movements in the Republic such as the Republican Society for the Protection of Nature and The Society of Hunters and Fishermen.

For the last few years, an informal ecological organization, the "Green Movement in Azerbaijan" has been in existence. A group of its active members came up with the initiative to form a Green Party of Azerbaijan in order to lobby for Parliamentary action and legislative initiatives. The Green Party was organized in 1993 and during the period since then, it has become the mass ecological organization of the Republic, which plays an active role in the socio-political life of the Republic. It should be noted that the Green Party is focused on organizational inner Party

- collection and distributions of reliable information on the environment, and the ecological education of the population
- organization of independent ecological expertise for projects and decisions, drawing up alternative plans and projects, ecologization of the decisions through participation in the decision making process
- public control over the state of the environment, quality of food products, observance of legislation on environmental protection and management decision
- formation and expression of public opinion on ecological problems
- carrying on and supporting practical measures and actions aimed at environmental protection, their financing, organizational and informational provision
- supporting and carrying out research work on different environmental problems

- integration and coordination of public efforts, development and promotion of contacts in this field, international cooperation and collaboration, study and promotion of the experience of ecological movements, and many other activities

Despite the difficulties facing a public movement aimed at protecting the environment, there is a steady increase in understanding of the significance of environmental problems and the support of public initiatives in the environmental field. More and more people are becoming aware of the fact that general success in the field of environmental protection will depend both on actual contributions from every member of society and on joint actions in this field. Certain elements of society in the Republic are trying to be more active in discussions of ecological problem and in the implementation of measures for their solution. The intensive ecologization of public consciousness during such a short period of time is directly associated with the fact that the society's social, economic, political and other problems have become concentrated on this sphere. Besides, these problems are of great concern for people of different nationality, social status, age and occupation. As a result of people's progressive awareness of the state of the environment, as well as the effects of anthropogenic activity, there is a notable growth in the understanding of the significance of human values, and, first of all, the value of life. The idea of human life and health being directly associated with a healthy environment which is a necessary prerequisite for the stable development of society, finds more ground in the public mentality. A healthy, non polluted environment is considered as an integral component of the quality of life. The changes going on in our society and influencing all the forms of public consciousness have created a base for "ecologism" in society, which is not only a practical initiative but also an integral part of the new ideological system.

It should be noted that the present burden of economic and socio economic difficulties makes the solution of ecological problems more difficult. Undoubtedly, when the country is facing many challenges due to the existence of a humanitarian crisis caused by the large number of IDP's and refugees, the Government gives priority to establishing political stability as well as developing the economic potential of the country. Due to the state budget deficit, full scale investment in measures for the protection of the environment becomes impossible and limits the possibilities of the Government to introduce a modern ecological policy. In such a situation, public ecological organizations are focused mainly on finding non Governmental means to resolve the ecological problems of high priority and the realization of educational programs. In the light of this, the comprehensive and notable activity of the UN mission in Azerbaijan, particularly, of the United Nations Development Programmes, is of invaluable importance.