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RESILIENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE “STATE PROGRAM ON THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONS – 2019-2023”

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ABSTRACT: Over the past two decades, the Republic of Azerbaijan has adopted three national strategy programs in order to accelerate the social and economic development of the country's regions. The primary objectives of these national strategies have been ecological safety and responsible use of natural resources, sustainable and balanced development as well as social welfare. In contrast to the previous programs implemented by the state, the new strategy includes the United Nations' principles of sustainable development goals that were formulated in “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. However, recommendations given in the Paris Agreement and in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction are also very important for the adoption of any national strategies. Therefore, this article analyzes the environmental and socio-economic activities that are integral to the newly adopted state program on Disaster Risk Reduction strategies and suggests further measures that could be taken improve the effectiveness of its implementation.

KEY WORDS: Azerbaijan, SDGs, Sendai Framework, Resilience, Disaster Risk Reduction

Introduction

The long-term economic development strategy that the government of the Republic of Azerbaijan is pursuing aims to ensure that the regions of the country develop in a resilient and sustainable way. The strategic outlook includes the creation of an atmosphere that favors the formation of a globally competitive economy. The components of such a system should be grounded in principles of sustainable development, social welfare of the highest standards and ecological safety systems that encourage the efficient use of natural resources as well as reliable environmental protection. Azerbaijan's national strategies regarding the socio-economic development of its regions are significant in the implementation of this latest state program and the process of transitioning to an innovative stage of social and economic development. The previous national strategies covering the periods of 2004-2008, 2009-2013 and 2014-2018 were implemented with great success and led to radically positive changes in both urban and regional areas of the country (Sardarov, 2018). The success of these previous national strategies has provided opportunities for Azerbaijan to increase the capacity of its infrastructure while improving the quality of public services and the welfare of its citizens in addition to facilitating a prosperous business and investment climate (Imrani and Musayeva, 2016).

The National Strategy on Socio-Economic Development of the Regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2019-2023 (NSA) was developed as a means of further enhancing achievements in the field of social and economic development of the country, particularly in regional and rural areas (Ministry of Economy, 2019). Its development was also designed to ensure the implementation of a Strategic Road Map that reliably anticipates risks and fortifies resilience to potential threats. The NSA will aid government departments and organizations in improving the regulatory framework relating to the country's development, which includes legislation as well as various institutional and economic mechanisms. Examples of instruments of influence are the stimulation of investment and innovation activities, the strengthening and integration of economic activities, the facilitation of access to financial resources, the extension of the range and quality of social services whilst ensuring their accessibility to low income families, the advancement of social programs that protect vulnerable people, the use of natural resources in a more efficient manner and the perfection of techniques used to control ecological issues (Dergunova and Smagulova, 2018).

As a consequence of the Azerbaijani government utilizing these instruments, there are expectations of achieving a range of positive outcomes. These include enhancement of the capabilities of economic agents, compre-

hensive and efficient use of natural resources, development of innovative goods and services as well as the creation and facilitation of the conditions necessary for sustainably developing a prosperous green economy (Ahmadov and Khalilov, 2019). Optimization of a green economy can be realized through the introduction of technological advances that ensure that non-oil sectors are developed in a sustainable way. This will serve to improve the likelihood of balanced regional development and increase the number of permanent green jobs thus creating opportunities for wealth generation and improved well-being for local communities.

The Review of the social and economic outcomes of previously implemented policies designed to increase resilience and socio-economic development in Azerbaijan.

By adopting and implementing national programs for socio-economic development, Azerbaijan has significantly improved factors that ensure that long-term sustainable progress targets are reached. The country has undergone a radical transformation since the 2004 roadmap was successfully implemented. From this time onwards, Azerbaijan has adopted three national programs aimed at increasing the country's levels of development and resilience to potential threats. The initial program was known as "Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Azerbaijan" and was implemented in the 2004-2008 period (Ministry of Economy, 2004). Its primary objective was the creation of sustainable development strategies for industries in the non-oil sector by advancing social infrastructure and services as well as providing better living standards to locals by increasing opportunities for employment. The second program, "Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Azerbaijan," was launched in 2009 and operated until 2013 (Ministry of Economy, 2009). Its aim was to further accelerate the advances of the non-oil sector and diversify the economy in a way that leads to sustainable and balanced regional development as well as long-term social and economic resilience. As a result of this program being successfully implemented, markers of resilient sustainable development significantly improved, which manifested as increases in various progress indicators. The success of these two policies fostered the implementation of the third program, "Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Azerbaijan" that was introduced in the 2014-2018 period (Ministry of Economy, 2014). The key innovations in this program were the further acceleration of policy reforms and the construction of stronger all-encompassing development strategies. In order to provide a general idea of the level of success that this third program has produced, ref-

erence can be made to the total number of facilities that were opened across the various districts and population centers in Azerbaijan. This number was over 1,800 in the 2014-2018 periods, which represents a 40% increase since the 2004-2013 periods (Isabalayeva, 2018).

The progress that has been made within these programs has significantly supported the efforts towards long-term sustainable socio-economic development of both national and regional economies and the communities they support. These advances have resulted in the overall GDP growing 3.3 times larger while the non-energy sector grew 2.8 times larger. Since 2014, currency reserves have risen 24 times, reaching roughly 45 billion USD in 2019 (Agasalim, 2019). A great deal of progress has been made within the framework of regional development programs towards ensuring the long-term sustainability of industries in the non-energy sector. Particular emphasis has been placed upon creating an ideal environment for the expansion of newly emerging high-tech innovative industries (Alakbarov, 2019). The transportation sector infrastructure is one example of an area that has undergone significant advancement in recent years as a result of large-scale investments into the sustainability of the sector. Noteworthy projects include extensive renovations made to vehicle fleets, bridge-building as well as the construction of new highways and repairs to damaged roads. The activities of the three important strategic projects have effectively produced positive results in terms of economic development as demonstrated by three-fold growth levels (Gahramanova, 2019).

There have been many indicators of progress in the field of regional and global infrastructure development. These advances have improved Azerbaijan's opportunity to participate in major transit projects, such as the stepping up of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia transport corridor in addition to the successful continuation of the construction of highways on the North-South and East-West transport corridors (Habibova and Zeynalova, 2018). Furthermore, the volume of freight cargo that can be transported through the Azerbaijani territory is anticipated to increase significantly with the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. This project will drastically improve the potential of Azerbaijan's transit capacity. Another indicator of progress was the Baku International Sea Trade Port Complex that was completed in 2018. Situated on the junction of the North-South and East-West transport corridors, the port has enabled greater potential transit capabilities and serves as a strategic transport hub for the processing of incoming and outgoing shipped goods. Throughout the last twenty years, Azerbaijan has seen the construction of 6 new airports. The country has also undergone extensive construction and repairs on around 14,000 km of key road infrastructure as well as 436 bridges and tunnels (Kizi, 2018).

A key component of these programs has been ensuring the long-term health and resilience of the natural environment that supports the well-being of local communities who depend on natural resources for their livelihood and survival. Numerous efforts have been made to maintain ecological harmony, adjust to the predicted effects of changing climate, ensure clean air and water for local people and encourage further protection of the natural environment. Many programs have focused on increasing the implementation of green activities throughout the past 15 years. In this period, over 133,000 hectares of land were used for carrying out tree farming and forestation measures. Furthermore, adverse environmental impacts were reduced and natural resources were preserved because of the construction of domestic waste sorting and combustion facilities. The implementation of plans that restore and develop social and economic infrastructure in the regions is providing local communities with ongoing services. This has been achieved by creating electrical, natural gas and water supply networks that are resilient and reliable. Likewise, health and education facilities have received large-scale public funding into their continued development (Aliyev, 2019).

In reflecting on the previous projects that have been successfully implemented in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the country's commitment to long-term resilience is very clear. Examples include the 28 power plant stations that have been built in suburban regions of Azerbaijan as well as the installation and repair of 45,000 km of electricity cables in order to ensure improved quality and resilience of the electricity coverage of populated areas (Nasibov, 2018). Similar efforts have been made to improve the country's energy infrastructure. During the last 15 years, 56,000 km of gas pipelines have been constructed or undergone significant reconstruction (Huseynov, 2018). Consequently, 94% of people living in suburban areas are currently being supplied with sufficient amounts of natural gas (Agasalim, 2019). It is also important to mention that the gasification of small, medium and large communities in suburban areas prevents the use of timber for energy, which leads to effective reforestation in certain regions. Another area of progress within this period has been the work carried out on the country's water supply network. Azerbaijan has sought to guarantee the supply of water to local communities through the construction of new water reservoirs as well as new sewage and water lines. Access to water resources has been specifically increased through the construction of 224 water reservoirs, 6,000 km of sewage canals and 11,000 km of water channels. Furthermore, the supply of safe drinking water has seen an increase from 9% to 44% (Aliyev, 2018). Particular attention has been given to improving irrigation in rural areas and using land and water resources more rationally. This focus has led to the construction and rehabilitation of 4,000 km of irrigation channels (Ahmadov and Khalilov, 2019).

Methods and Objectives of the 2019-2023 National Strategy

The primary purpose of the 2019-2023 State Program is the positive transformation of Azerbaijan's environment so that its regions are able to benefit from both the sustainability and resilience that development provides. Other important aims of this new state program are the building of a robust economy that is founded on sustainable development targets, effective social welfare systems, efficient allocation of natural resources as well as the protection of local ecosystems and the environment. Further objectives of the new program are listed as follows (Ministry of Economy, 2019):

1. Continuing to increase activities involving innovation and investment.
2. Introducing advanced technology and technical equipment.
3. Diversifying and growing towards a more competitive and effective economy.
4. Policies of self-sufficient environmentally friendly production of vital food supplies.
5. Improving employment opportunities and the total number of employers in the regions.
6. Reducing poverty, raising living standards and strengthening community well-being.
7. Improving accessibility to quality social services like education and healthcare.
8. Providing alternative sources of energy.
9. Improving transportation and road infrastructure within suburban areas.
10. Developing management and supply strategies for water resources.
11. Refining legislation and other systems in financial institutions.
12. Rehabilitating and accelerating the role of private and public aid in the regions.
13. Using modern technologies to expand existing infrastructure.
14. Increasing the level of scientific research and innovation.
15. Acquiring public and private support of activities based on research and innovation.
16. Developing rigorous and effective insurance systems.
17. Using natural resources efficiently and protecting the environment.

Successfully implementing the objectives above requires financial support. Being a state program, it is to be financed through the Republic of Azerbaijan's state budget in addition to extra-budgetary funds as well as both foreign and domestic investments (Ministry of Economy, 2019). The table below provides a rough outline of the action plans for the State Program 2019-2023 concerning Environmental Social and Economic Activities and the executive bodies governing each activity.

Results of the 2019-2023 National Strategy

Table 1. Activities in the field of Ecology and Natural Resources

Activities	Period	Executive bodies
Improvement of the hydrometeorological networks	2019-2023	The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources
Greening policy and forestation: - 157 hectares of new forestation belt with drip irrigation system along Alat-Astara city highway, - 45 hectares of new forestation with drip irrigation system in Shirvan National Park, - 35 hectares of new forestation with drip irrigation system along the highway between Baku and Guba cities.	2019-2023	Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, local branches of executive bodies
Locating and evaluating underground freshwater deposits	2019-2023	The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources
Establishing complex environmental monitoring laboratories	2019-2023	Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, State Agency for Control of Antimonopoly and Consumer Market
Conducting geological exploration	2019-2023	The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources
Organization of environmental awareness for the population	2019-2023	Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, Ministry of Education, local branches of executive bodies and municipalities
Improvement of solid waste management	2019-2023	Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, Ministry of Education, local branches of executive bodies
Improvement of the ecological preservation and rehabilitation of the lakes in Absheron Peninsula, continuation of the works in Boyukshor Lake ("Great Salt Lake")	2019-2023	Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources

Source: author's own work.

Table 2. Activities in the field of Transportation Facilities Development

Activities	Period	Executive bodies
Further progress in constructing railway infrastructure projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - East-West railway route: lanes, power supply and communication systems, - North-South railway route: lanes, power supply and communication systems, - Construction of the Laki-Gabala railway route. 	2019-2023	"Azerbaijan Railways" CJSC, Ministry of Economy
Further progress in constructing road infrastructure projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of a new highway on the state border of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation (132-192 km), - Expansion of the highway on the state border of Azerbaijan and Georgia (Ganja City to Georgian border), - Highway reconstruction on the state border of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran (81 km of Balasuvur (AZE) highway). 	2019-2023	State Agency for Roads, Ministry of Economy

Source: author's own work.

Table 3. Activities in the field of Energy

Activities	Period	Executive bodies
Further progress in constructing electric power projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Construction of small hydropower plants, - Reconstructing high voltage transmission lines and stations, - Construction of renewable energy power stations, - Assistance to rural areas via the production of biofuels and bioenergy from agricultural waste, - Use of renewable energy sources in irrigation systems and household heating systems, - Completion and Maintenance of the "Southern Gas Corridor". 	2019-2023	Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Economy, "Azerenergy" OJSC, Ministry of Agriculture, "Melioration and Water Management" OJSC, "Azeristiliktechizat", SOCAR

Source: author's own work.

International practices guiding National Strategy Policy

Azerbaijan is developing its national strategy using important theoretical and methodological approaches from already existing international practices in the fields of sustainable economic, social and environmental development (Huseynov, 2019). Although each country possesses unique characteristics and implements custom sustainability strategies according to their developmental needs, it is significantly beneficial to share mutual ethics and international attitudes on the most effective actions in the area of environmental protection. Issues of key concern include human-caused impacts upon natural resources resulting in the depletion of minerals, land, water and forests. Other concerns include the expansion of environmentally harmful industrial

production activities and the escalation of uncontrolled land use and exploitation. The interchange of ideas and experiences in order to incorporate global practices into programs aimed at national development has become the contemporary paradigm for international collaboration and strategic policy-making. In contrast to previous standards, this new style of cooperation at an international level solves problems more efficiently by bringing together the policies and knowledge of neighboring countries and innovating existing approaches to promote both economic competitiveness and resilience in accordance with the ideals of the growing green movement (Albrito, 2018).

International cooperation and regional integration were established by Azerbaijan in its previous programs of local and regional development. These programs have stimulated significant projects while developing the region's economic and social infrastructure in order to meet international standards. In an effort to increase the general well-being of communities, Baku has permitted the active involvement of local governments. This includes the involvement of rural communities and self-governance bodies in the planning and implementation of regional development programs. Azerbaijan's next stage of resilient advancement was significantly assisted by international principles throughout the process of drafting the country's 2019-2023 regional development programs. Unlike development programs of the past, the new program includes the United Nations' principles of sustainable development (Ministry of Economy, 2019). These principles are known internationally as "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" and serve as the foundation for agreements of cooperation that have been made with Azerbaijan's international partners (UN, 2018). The leading global and regional theoretical approaches and practical methods in the area of innovative solutions have become a vital component of the country's national program for the 2019-2023 period. The merging of this knowledge into the program will help to facilitate efficient and effective management of the social and economic development of Azerbaijan's urban and rural areas.

Measures that could be added to the National Strategy 2019-2023

In the modern world, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is a fundamental part of any effective sustainable development strategy (Kelman, 2015). In spite of a global awareness and understanding of the growing risks of natural disasters and an international commitment to disaster risk reduction, many countries have not yet completely taken into account the full gravity of their exposure to global risks in their development planning and manage-

ment styles. Natural disasters and catastrophic events are often viewed as one-off isolated incidences rather than a part of a greater looming threat. Usually the bulk of financial aid and media attention in the aftermath is focused on repairing property damage and dealing with humanitarian consequences of the disasters instead of addressing the causes of disasters.

Recognizing emerging risks and spreading awareness of imminent challenges is essential to implementing an effective approach towards sustainable development and resilience. In order to build long-term resilience to potential threats in this rapidly evolving world, it is necessary for countries to adopt appropriate development programs and strategic models (Albrito, 2018). In particular, it is essential that countries make progress in implementation of two key UN documents, namely the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Sustainable Development Goals (UNDRR, 2015). Both of these documents were designed to specifically target equitable, resilient and sustainable progress. Azerbaijan's 2019-2023 State Program addresses three primary interlinkages between resilient development and disaster risks. These are 1) the integration of DRR strategies into decision-making processes and policy development, 2) the alignment of every future state program and project with the SDGs and Sendai Framework targets, and 3) the integration of governing bodies and state institutions into a strategic action plan.

It has been emphasized that the adoption of the 2019-2023 State Program by the Republic of Azerbaijan is very likely to promote further socio-economic development of the nation over the next 5-year period. Nevertheless, successful reduction of environmental, economic and social risks and their potential consequences needs proper disaster risk management and resilient disaster risk governance. This strategy in combination with the integration of DRR into the state program would help prepare Azerbaijan for the possible negative effects of climate change in addition to supporting the country's sustainable advancement. As such, there is a necessity for the Republic of Azerbaijan's state program to make reference to three central documents: the SDGs, the Sendai Framework and the Paris Agreement (Kinley, 2017). Regarding potential natural disasters, Azerbaijan is surrounded by sea, rivers and mountains. The country is subject to many disasters each year, including floods and landslides. A few high magnitude earthquakes have been recorded over the last two decades. Additionally, Azerbaijan is now likely to face man-made disasters and industrial accidents because of the economy's heavy industrialization. Therefore, it is critical for Azerbaijan to continue its active absorption of the 2030 Sendai Framework into its 2019-2023 State Program in order to support the state's capacity for risk reduction and disaster preparedness. So, in contrast to prior state programs that have

been implemented since 2004, the programs for 2019-2023 should seek to guarantee a methodical style of identifying and assessing possible disaster risks while minimizing the potential socio-economic consequences to Azerbaijan and its intended future projects.

Conclusions

The "State Program on the Social and Economic Development of Regions 2019-2023" is a highly anticipated national strategy for Azerbaijan in the continuation of progress on socio-economic areas over the next period of time. In particular, projects focusing on sustainable ecological systems, preservation of natural resources, development of transportation and energy facilities are playing a significant role in the country's long-term sustainable development. The integration of DRR along with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development targets into all institutions of government would be likely enhance these activities and facilitate the strengthening of resilience of future planned projects. Adapting to climate change and integrating strategies aimed at reducing the risk of disasters will be essential to successfully implementing the state program of 2019-2023.

In accordance with the recommendations derived from research, adjusting to the effects of climate change and adopting a proper DRR strategy will aid in Azerbaijan's emergence into a new and more prosperous period of increased resilience and development. The implementation of comprehensive protocol for management of risk and greater civil protection will ensure an improved level of environmental safety during the future socio-economic development of Azerbaijan. In the context of implementing the state program, the rural and regional areas could become the focus of attention especially within the framework of an agenda for resilient development. Furthermore, the social and economic development of Azerbaijan as well as the broader South Caucasus region will be further accelerated by using the existing potential of the country more efficiently. This acceleration will occur with the adoption and integration of international practices into the state program. The successful implementation of the "State Program on the Social and Economic Development of Regions – 2019-2023" will consequently result in the resilient continuation of Azerbaijan's sustainable development in the long-term future. This success will likely include other positive outcomes related to the dynamic strategies of resilient socio-economic development in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

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