

## **Forced marriage of ecology and economy**

*by Chibli Mallat*

In the final analysis, the environment is an economic issue. Drawing on the title of a chapter by the French academic Robert Fossaert (*Le Monde au 21ème Siècle*, Paris, 1991), Lebanon should be a model experimental ground for “the forced marriage of economy and ecology”. In other, more technical words, the development of Valeur d’Echange (VE, transforming products into merchandise), which has dominated the logic of production from the Italian trecento to the late 20th century, is giving way to a new economic logic for the next millennium, one which Fossaert calls VD Valeur de Développement (or in my preferred rendering, VC Valeur de Civilisation see last Monday’s article). How to make the smoothest passage from VE to VC is the ultimate challenge of the new millennium.

No economic sector is more fit for the implementation of VD-VC than the environment. New environmental values are being designed world-wide to complement a different concept of labour, where time units are included, which had been so far disregarded by economists. In an environmental programme, the direction to be taken by our economy next century, partly in tune and partly in anticipation of a world trend, is best illustrated in the inclusion of the ecology as a central economic indicator.

This does not mean a concept of the environment as a sacred cow and economic development as its nemesis, but an environment which produces such values which a new logic of economic production must take into the profit-and-loss account.

Switzerland’s clean air and green pastures are not included in its GDP, even if it is an added value by cutting health costs (diminishing pollution), improving the habitat of the labour force (by increasing its efficiency) and adding significant attraction for tourists and the resulting income. So we must be attentive to a concept of production which includes environmental values as indicia of economic growth with a mathematical coefficient. This is the essence of VC, when the economy is happily, scientifically wedded to the environment.

Last year, I proposed a list of priorities and an overall mechanism needed to engage the country in the reform of its poor environmental record (*The Daily Star*, April 17 and May 1, 1997). This article will consider the issue in the light of the continuing deterioration of the environmental situation and the hopes made possible by the presidential elections.

The fundamentals mentioned in those articles were backed by a summary programme put together last year by the energetic representative of Greenpeace in Lebanon. The

report delineated the priorities as follows: reforestation and regulation of quarrying; cleaning the sea and water effluent; reducing and treating waste (toxic and otherwise); and implementing urban regulations. Policy was summarised as an enhancement of the environment ministry and the pursuit of a wide and sustained awareness campaign.

It is difficult to disagree with those premises, which should be appreciated against the available international expertise in this domain. With a view to making a presidential programme for the environment more effective, one may add or qualify the Greenpeace report with a number of remarks drawn from a close observation of the present government's work.

First, the establishment of priorities. The Lebanese environment ministry is starved of funds. The question is therefore to examine ways of including the private sector and the wider public, mostly through the new municipal councils, in an exciting and profitable manner.

However ugly Lebanese quarrying has been, the wall of money and interests which quarry owners have built makes it extremely difficult to close them down. Most of the territorial sea, however, can be cleaned without having to overcome established and obstructive financial interests.

It would therefore be more useful to invest whatever meagre resources the country has in a systematic campaign which improves the seashore and the cleanliness of our water. Both Italy and the three states on the Bodensee in Europe have succeeded in recent years in similar efforts and the countries involved produce much more industrial waste than Lebanon.

Reforestation is another success story in-the-waiting. Green Lebanon is no more, and various private and public endeavours, mostly coming from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have started registering some success in a few areas.

One problem is the resistance of private owners but the immense amount of masha' (communal) land in the Lebanon and the Ante-Lebanon mountain chains, in Akkar and in the various jurd (remote areas) could be the crucible of a unique experience we can offer to the world. Independent Eritrea has planted 5m trees in less than six years, and the beautiful forests east of Lattakia, all the way to the Turkish border, are a nearby model which deserves replication. Imagine driving from Beirut to the Bekaa in six years with a double range of greening mountains across our skyline.

These are two examples in which the presidency can show, at the end of its six-year term, a physically radical change for the better.

There are other hard pressing issues, including toxic and non-toxic waste, and one should emphasise the suggestion of Greenpeace to add a technology unit to the ministry of the environment. I would also develop the ministry in various directions which have hitherto remained hampered by environmentally-oblivious bureaucracies in the interior, foreign affairs, and defence sectors.

Anticipating a nation-wide discussion on the environment, which would bring in, for

the first time, contributions from these three key components of old-style government, one could foresee how the use of units of the army and security forces as a part-time “green brigade” can give an immense boost both to these forces and to the country. Rather than wiling away the boredom of the barracks, the mobilisation of tens of thousands of able men on various environmental campaigns would provide a quantum change in our landscape. The army seems willing, never hesitating to help when natural disasters strike. Man-made environmental damage over the past three decades is no less of a disaster needing redress.

As for the foreign ministry, rather than waste their time in diplomatic functions which a small country like ours can ill afford, it would be enriching both intellectually and materially to use our diplomats’ talents differently. For instance, in identifying international donors, investors and models which can be used for an ambitious programme to create a Green Lebanon.

A national debate on the environment would also examine ways to integrate the efforts of NGOs, industrial concerns and the new municipalities under a principle of subsidiarity which would require the central government to intervene only when entities and interests closer to the ground are not strong or effective enough to take on the environmental challenge.

The state would also be the overall administrative and economic overseer for inevitable conflicts of interest, especially with regard to industrial development. The government would act as a coordinator of such efforts and a supporter of various municipal and national competitions which would make the environment a key economic component for a new, vibrant Lebanon. Nothing fires the imagination better than well-deserved environmental awards the prettiest municipality of the year, the cleanest beach, the greenest building facade, the most environmentallyfriendly industrial company, the most effective NGO, the best environmental media investigation, and so forth, with financial support where appropriate.

Chibli Mallat is an attorney and professor of law. This is the seventh in a series of articles on the presidential elections for The Daily Star