

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study examines how natural resources are perceived as a strategic factor in economic development and evaluates the role of public policies, sustainable management, investment, and technology in supporting their efficient use. **Methods:** The study employed a quantitative survey conducted in Albania with 200 respondents from public administration, the fields of economics and environmental studies, and other professional backgrounds. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the respondents' perceptions, while a simple linear regression model was applied to examine the relationship between the perceived importance of public policies and the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development. **Results:** The respondents assigned high importance to natural resources, particularly forests, water, and land, and emphasized that their sustainable management depends on effective policy implementation, investment, and technological innovation. The regression analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between public policies and the dependent variable. **Conclusions:** The findings suggest that natural resources can support long-term economic development only when accompanied by coherent and sustainable policy frameworks, effective institutional coordination, sustainable resource management, and technological modernization.

Key words: natural resources, economic development, sustainable management, public policies, resource governance, economic sustainability

JEL codes: O13, Q28, Q56

INTRODUCTION

Natural resources are a fundamental basis in economic development, directly influencing the production structure, economic growth, and social welfare. In many economies, particularly in developing countries, natural resources are seen as a strategic factor that can stimulate investment, create jobs, and support long-term development (Mirzayev, 2024). However, the economic benefits of natural resources are not guaranteed

and depend significantly on how they are managed and governed. Natural resources such as oil, gas, minerals, and agriculturally suitable land contribute significantly to national income generation, job creation, and industrial development (Alessandri, 2024). A fundamental problem in countries with abundant natural resources is that primary sectors typically provide low levels of employment, creating significant economic and environmental challenges. Some countries continue to rely on the intensive exploitation of natural resources

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as a primary source of income, thereby accelerating ecosystem degradation (Morales-Urrutia et al., 2025a). The analysis of the complex relationship between natural resources and economic development is essential for policymakers and economists, as it informs the design of policies and strategies aimed at achieving sustainable growth, reducing poverty, and managing the environment effectively (Afzal et al., 2023). However, the presence of natural resources does not necessarily guarantee a positive impact on economic growth. Their effect depends on a range of structural and institutional factors. The positive relationship between natural resources and economic growth is contingent on the presence of high-quality institutions, good governance, and effective anti-corruption mechanisms (Hayat & Tahir, 2021). In summary, natural resources are considered a strategic national asset that, when managed and utilized sustainably, can contribute to long-term economic development and competitiveness (Namazi & Mohammadi, 2018).

Despite the broad theoretical literature on the resource curse and natural resource-led development, fewer studies have examined how professionals and institutional actors perceive the policy conditions under which natural resources can support sustainable economic development in Albania. This study addresses this gap by providing perception-based empirical evidence from the Albanian context, where natural resources are closely linked to rural livelihoods, environmental protection, and the country's sustainable development priorities. Its novelty lies in connecting professional perceptions of forests, water, land, investment, technology, and public policy to the broader debate on resource governance and sustainability-oriented development. The contribution of the study is threefold: first, it identifies which natural resources are perceived as most relevant to economic development; second, it assesses perceptions of current management and sustainability; and third, it tests whether the perceived importance of public policies is statistically associated with the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development. In this way, the study extends the existing literature by adding empirical evidence from Albania, a developing and transition economy where natural resource governance remains important for long-term economic resilience and environmental sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Natural resources are considered one of the key strategic factors in economic development, influencing the production structure, output growth, and social welfare. However, the presence of natural resources does not necessarily guarantee sustainable economic benefits. Sachs and Warner (1996; 2001) discuss the phenomenon known as the “resource curse,” in which excessive natural resource wealth can hinder economic development if not properly managed. Auty (1993) highlights that countries with mineral-intensive economies face particular challenges in transforming natural wealth into sustainable economic development. In line with this, van der Ploeg (2010) argues that the impact of natural resources depends on multiple factors, including institutions and economic policy. The role of institutions and good governance is essential for the effective utilization of natural resources. Mehlum et al. (2006) show that the existence of high-quality institutions and anti-corruption mechanisms helps prevent the “resource curse.” Ross (2001), as well as Collier and Goderis (2007), argue that the way natural resource revenues are managed, as well as economic policy choices, has a direct impact on long-term development and economic stability. In the context of environmental sustainability, Dasgupta (2021) emphasizes that integrating nature and natural resources into development strategies is essential for sustainable growth. Makhdom et al. (2022) and Morales-Urrutia et al. (2025b) argue that the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources can lead to environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and direct impacts on agriculture, water resources, and public health.

Natural resources also have a significant impact on rural development and the production structure. Barbier (2010) shows that effective management of land and water resources is crucial for sustainable economic development.

Natural resources and the sustainable use of land are considered essential factors in economic development and environmental stability. In this context, Czyżewski and Brelik (2015) emphasize the importance of land intrinsic productivity in sustainable agriculture, arguing that land quality and management

directly affect economic performance and ecosystem preservation. This perspective supports the idea that natural resources should be managed efficiently in order to ensure long-term development.

Furthermore, the impact of economic activities on the environment has been analyzed by Okaş (2022), who highlights the relationship between export diversification and CO₂ emissions and demonstrates that economic structures and trade policies significantly influence environmental sustainability. This indicates that economic development should be harmonized with environmental protection objectives and the rational use of natural resources.

At the local and regional level, studies conducted in Albania provide an important contribution to understanding the relationship between natural resources and socio-economic development. Muça and Diku (2020) analyze the socio-economic effects on the management of protected areas, taking Dajti National Park as a case study. The authors argue that the effective management of protected areas requires a balance between local economic development and biodiversity conservation.

Similarly, Tola et al. (2023) assess the economic benefits farmers gain from land use in the erosion-prone areas of the Ulza watershed, highlighting the importance of sustainable land-use practices for rural development and environmental protection. Their findings show that rational land management positively affects the economic well-being of rural communities.

Meanwhile, Minga et al. (2023) emphasize the role of social and territorial innovation in local development through an analysis of the Puka region. The study argues that local development can be supported through the sustainable use of natural resources, community involvement, and innovative territorial policies, thereby reducing regional inequalities and strengthening the local economy.

In summary, the existing literature demonstrates that natural resources can serve as a strategic factor in economic development when managed through effective governance, strong institutions, and sustainable policies. On the other hand, their mismanagement may create structural and environmental barriers, limiting the potential for long-term development.

AIM AND METHOD

The aim of the study is to analyze the perceived role of natural resources in economic development and to assess whether public policies, sustainable management, investment, and technology are considered important factors for their efficient utilization. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- Which natural resources are perceived as the most important in economic development?
- How do respondents assess the current management of natural resources?
- Which factors are perceived as the most relevant for improving natural resource management?
- Is there a statistically significant relationship between the perceived importance of public policies and the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development?

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Primary data were collected in Albania through a structured questionnaire administered electronically to 200 respondents. The target group included representatives from public administration, economics, environmental studies, and other professional backgrounds, as these groups are directly or indirectly involved in policy implementation, economic planning, environmental protection, and natural resource management. The survey design follows the logic of structured perception-based studies, in which standardized questions enable comparable responses across individuals and support both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses (Dillman et al., 2014; Field, 2018).

Respondents were selected using a non-probability purposive sampling strategy, combined with convenience sampling through electronic distribution. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study sought perceptions from individuals with professional or institutional exposure to economic planning, environmental protection, public administration, or natural resource management. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Therefore, the sample should be interpreted as a professionally oriented perception sample rather than as a statistically representative sample of the entire Albanian population.

The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions, measured primarily through categorical responses and five-point Likert-type scales. The dependent variable in the regression analysis was the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development, measured on a five-point scale from low to very high. The independent variable was the perceived importance of public policies for the efficient use of natural resources, also measured using a five-point Likert-type scale. Questions concerning the types of natural resources and management factors allowed multiple responses where appropriate. Therefore, the results for these questions are presented as the percentages of respondents selecting each option rather than as mutually exclusive categories.

The data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to present the sample profile and the distribution of responses for each survey item. Second, inferential analysis was performed using a simple linear regression model.

Although both variables are formally ordinal, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used as a parsimonious approximation to estimate the average linear association between them. The five response categories were coded from 1 to 5 and treated as approximately equally spaced, allowing the coefficient to be interpreted as an average change in scale points. This treatment is considered acceptable for an exploratory association analysis because parametric procedures, including regression, are generally robust when applied to five-category Likert-type data, particularly with a moderate sample size (Norman, 2010). Nevertheless, the OLS estimates are interpreted cautiously as approximate associations rather than exact interval-scale effects.

The regression model is specified as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Policy_i + \varepsilon_i$$

In this model, Y_i represents the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development for respondent i ; β_0 is the intercept; β_1 is the estimated regression coefficient; $Policy_i$ represents the perceived importance of public policies for the efficient use of natural resources; and ε_i is the error term.

The model was used to examine whether stronger perceptions of the importance of public policies are associated with a higher perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable development. The results are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal effects, since the data are cross-sectional and based on respondents' perceptions.

RESULTS

The study included 200 respondents with diverse demographic, educational, and professional characteristics. The sample included respondents from public administration, economics, environmental fields, and other professional backgrounds (Fig. 1), enabling the analysis to capture both institutional and sectoral perspectives on natural resource governance. Gender representation was relatively balanced, while the high share of respondents with Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degrees suggests that the responses reflect an informed assessment of the relationship between natural resources and economic development.

The respondents' professional profiles are important for interpreting the findings. The dominance of public administration, economics, and environmental backgrounds means that the results mainly reflect the views of actors directly or indirectly connected to policy implementation, economic planning, environmental protection, or resource management. This strengthens the relevance of the findings for policy-oriented discussion and confirms the study's perception-based nature.

The findings indicate that respondents perceive natural resources as an important factor in economic development. Rather than viewing natural resources only as inputs for production or extraction, the responses suggest that their development value depends on how they are managed, protected, and integrated into broader sustainability-oriented policy frameworks. This result supports the theoretical argument that natural resources contribute to long-term development when they are embedded in effective governance systems.

Because respondents were allowed to select more than one resource category, Figure 2 reports the percentage of respondents selecting each option. Forests,

water, and land were the most frequently selected resources, suggesting a strong orientation toward renewable and environmentally sensitive resources. These resources are central to agricultural productivity, biodiversity conservation, rural livelihoods, and the provision of ecosystem services. The lower emphasis on minerals and energy may reflect awareness of the environmental limitations and sustainability risks associated with non-renewable resources.

Respondents’ assessments of current natural resource management (Fig. 3) are mixed rather than uniformly positive. Although a considerable share of respondents considers management to be sustainable, the combined share of partial and negative assessments points to continuing concerns regarding institutional coordination, regulatory enforcement, and environmental protection. This finding indicates that Albania’s natural resource governance requires

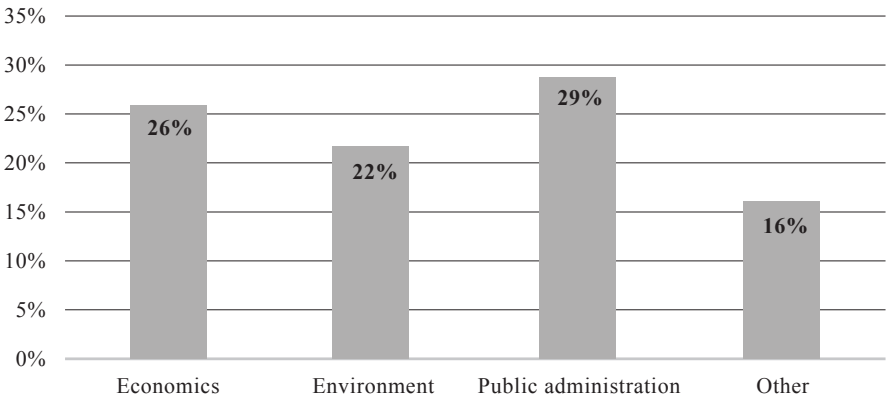


Fig. 1. Respondents by main field of activity

Source: Authors’ research.

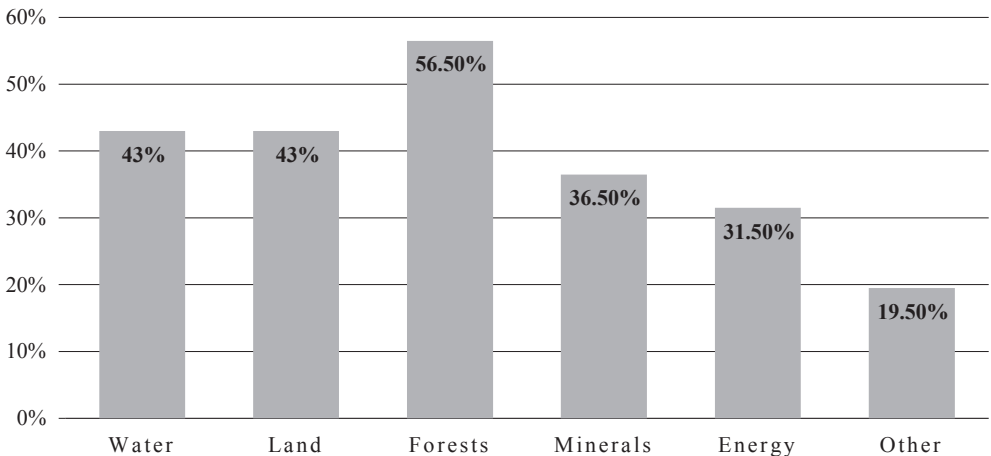


Fig. 2. Perceived most important natural resources for economic development (percentage of respondents; multiple-choice answers allowed)

Source: Authors’ research.

not only policy design but also stronger implementation capacity. The responses also show broad support for development models that protect natural resources. Most respondents link economic development without environmental damage to the presence of sustainable policies, reinforcing the argument that growth and environmental protection should be treated as complementary objectives rather than competing priorities.

Public policies are perceived as a central condition for the efficient use and sustainable management of natural resources. The high importance assigned

to public policies reflects the expectation that government action, institutional coordination, environmental regulation, and long-term planning are necessary for transforming natural resources into sustainable development assets (Fig. 4). This interpretation is consistent with the governance-oriented literature on natural resources. Respondents identified investment and technology as the leading factors influencing improved natural resource management, with investment at 38% and technology at 29.5%. As this was a multiple-choice item, results are reported as percentages of respondents selecting each factor. The findings indicate that

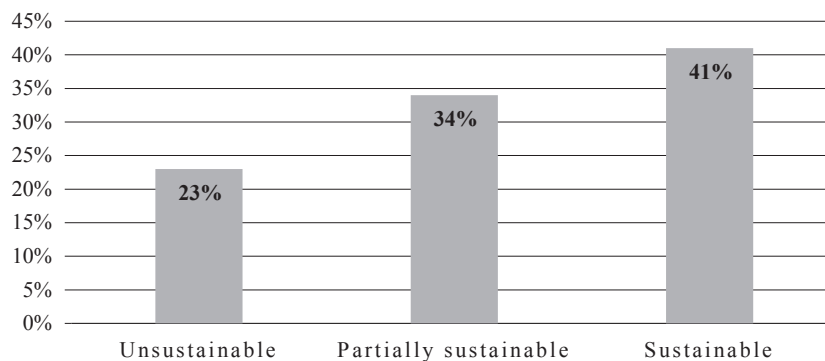


Fig. 3. Assessment of the current management of natural resources

Source: Authors' research.

Table 1. Linear regression model predicting the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development

Indicator/Variable	Value/Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value
Dependent variable	Perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development	–	–
Independent variable	Perceived importance of public policies for the efficient use of natural resources	–	–
Observations	200	–	–
<i>R</i>	0.872	–	–
<i>R</i> ²	0.760	–	–
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.759	–	–
Standard error	0.493	–	–
ANOVA F-statistic	627.60	–	<0.001
Intercept	0.994	3.154	0.0019
Public policies	0.864	25.052	<0.001

Source: Authors' research.

economic modernization, digital monitoring, and technological innovation are perceived as important tools for improving efficiency and reducing environmental pressure. However, technology and investment are unlikely to be effective without an enabling legal framework and capable institutions, a point emphasized in the natural resource governance literature (Mehlum et al., 2006; van der Ploeg, 2010).

The results also demonstrate strong support for integrating sustainability principles into economic development strategies. The majority of respondents

selected the highest categories of importance, indicating that sustainability is perceived as a core component of modern development planning rather than as an additional or secondary objective (Fig. 5).

This finding suggests that respondents favor development approaches based on rational resource use, ecosystem protection, and long-term economic resilience. It also highlights the need for economic strategies that explicitly connect investment, public policy, and environmental protection to avoid the short-term exploitation of natural resources.

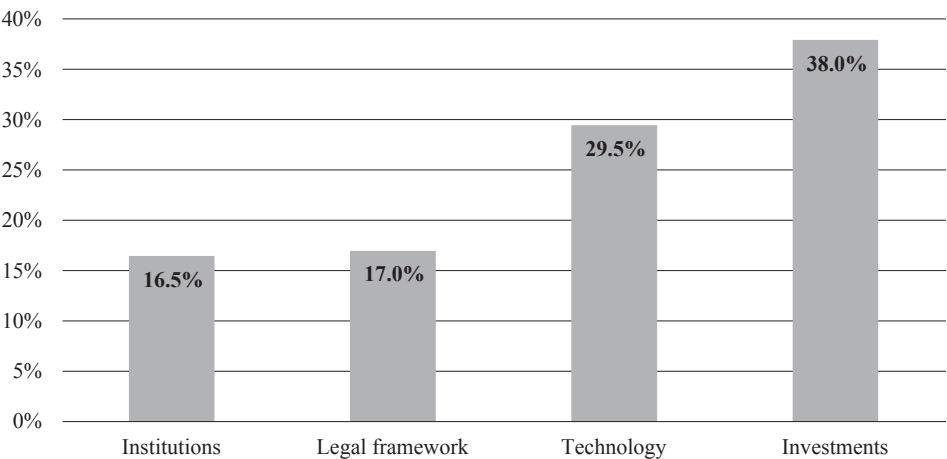


Fig. 4. Main factors influencing the improvement of natural resource management (percentage of respondents; multiple-choice answers allowed)

Source: Authors’ research.

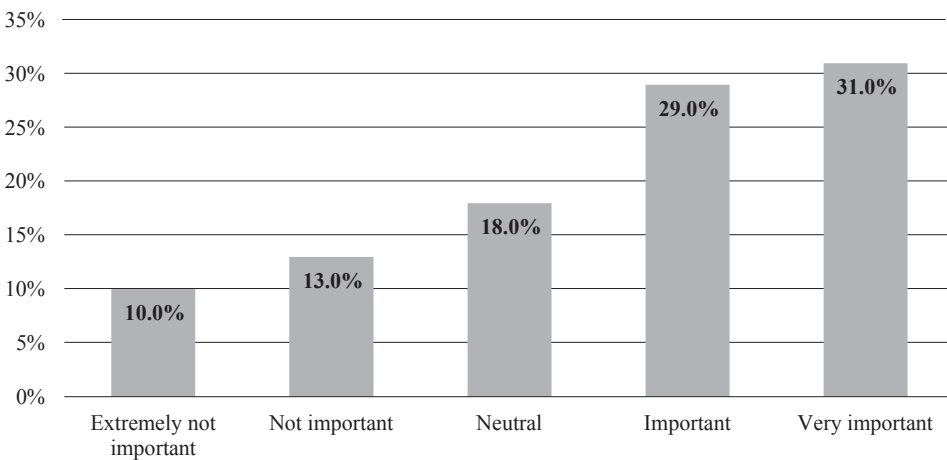


Fig. 5. Importance of integrating sustainability into development strategies

Source: Authors’ research.

The regression analysis assessed the relationship between the perceived importance of public policies for the efficient use of natural resources and the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development (Table 1). The model shows high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.760$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.759$), indicating a strong statistical association between the two perception-based variables. The correlation coefficient ($R = 0.872$) also confirms a strong positive association.

The ANOVA results show that the model is statistically significant ($F = 627.60$; $p < 0.001$). The coefficient for public policies is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.864$; $t = 25.052$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents who place greater importance on public policies also tend to assign a higher development contribution to natural resources. This result should be interpreted as an association, not as evidence of causality, because the study is based on cross-sectional perception data.

Overall, the regression results support the argument that coherent public policies are perceived as an essential mechanism for improving natural resource management and strengthening the contribution of natural resources to development. At the same time, future studies should consider multivariate models that include governance quality, institutional trust, education level, professional background, and environmental awareness as additional explanatory variables.

DISCUSSION

The findings are consistent with the wider literature showing that natural resources can support development, but their contribution depends on governance, institutions, and policy choices. Auty (1993) and Sachs and Warner (2001) argue that resource abundance may become a constraint when economies depend excessively on extractive sectors and lack institutional capacity. In contrast, the present results show that respondents do not perceive natural resources as inherently beneficial; rather, they link their role in development to sustainable policies, management quality, investment, and technology.

The preference for forests, water, and land also aligns with studies emphasizing the economic and ecological importance of renewable resources and ecosystem services. Barbier (2010) argues that land and water management are fundamental for sustainable development, while Dasgupta (2021) stresses that nature should be treated as productive capital rather than as an unlimited external input. In the Albanian context, this interpretation is also supported by studies on protected areas and rural land use, which show that sustainable management can generate socio-economic benefits while protecting biodiversity and local livelihoods (Muça & Diku, 2020; Tola et al., 2023).

The mixed assessment of current management practices indicates that natural resource governance remains a critical issue. Although 41% of respondents evaluate management as sustainable, the combined share of respondents choosing partially sustainable or unsustainable responses is higher. This suggests that policy implementation, inter-institutional coordination, and regulatory enforcement require further improvement. This finding is consistent with Mehlum et al. (2006), who emphasize that institutional quality determines whether natural resources become a development asset or a source of inefficiency and conflict.

The strong role attributed to public policies is also consistent with van der Ploeg (2010), who argues that the economic effect of natural resources depends on macroeconomic governance, institutional capacity, and long-term policy design. The positive regression coefficient indicates that respondents who place greater importance on public policies also tend to assign greater development value to natural resources. This reinforces the view that natural resources should be governed through integrated public policy frameworks rather than through fragmented sectoral interventions.

Investment and technology were perceived as important mechanisms for improving natural resource management. This result corresponds with research showing that innovation, renewable energy, financial development, and institutional quality can reduce environmental pressure while supporting

growth (Makhdum et al., 2022). Nevertheless, technological modernization should not be interpreted as a substitute for governance. Instead, technology can improve monitoring, planning, and efficiency only when embedded in transparent legal frameworks and supported by accountable institutions.

The interpretation of the regression results should be approached with caution. The high R^2 indicates a strong statistical association, but it may also reflect conceptual proximity between the two perception-based variables. Therefore, the revised manuscript avoids causal language and interprets the model as evidence of association. Future research should use broader models, longitudinal data, or objective indicators of policy quality and resource management outcomes to validate the relationship more rigorously. In addition, OLS treats the five ordered response categories as approximately equally spaced; therefore, the coefficient summarizes an average linear trend and may conceal category-specific differences. Future research should model the ordinal independent variable using four dummy variables, with one category serving as the reference group. This specification would avoid imposing a constant linear effect across response categories and would permit a more flexible assessment of the relationship. Given the ordinal dependent variable, ordinal logit or probit models could also be used as robustness checks.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature by showing that respondents perceive natural resources as strategic development assets only when combined with sustainability-oriented policies, institutional coordination, investment, and technological innovation. These results support the theoretical proposition that natural resource abundance alone is insufficient for development and must be transformed into long-term productive capital through effective governance and sustainable management.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides empirical evidence that natural resources are perceived as a significant strategic asset for economic development, particularly when they are governed through institutional effectiveness and sus-

tainability-oriented policy frameworks. Renewable resources, including water, land, and forests, are identified as critical components for long-term economic resilience, rural development, ecosystem protection, and environmental stability.

A principal conclusion of the study is that the economic contribution of natural resources is conditional upon the quality of governance and institutional arrangements. While respondents generally evaluate current management practices as moderately effective, concerns regarding partial sustainability underline the need for strengthened institutional capacity, improved regulatory enforcement, and better coordination among public institutions.

Moreover, perceptions of public policy effectiveness are strongly associated with the perceived contribution of natural resources to sustainable economic development. The regression results confirm a strong positive relationship ($R^2 = 0.760$; $\beta = 0.864$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents who assign greater importance to public policies also tend to evaluate natural resources as more important for sustainable development.

Investment and technological innovation are also recognized as essential complementary factors for improving efficiency and sustainability in resource use. However, their effectiveness depends on the existence of coherent institutional and regulatory frameworks, transparent implementation mechanisms, and long-term policy continuity.

Overall, the findings corroborate the theoretical proposition that natural resource abundance alone does not guarantee economic prosperity. Sustainable development requires an integrated governance approach that combines effective public policies, strong institutions, technological advancement, and sustainable management practices. Accordingly, natural resources should be conceptualized not merely as short-term economic inputs but as strategic, long-term capital requiring prudent, forward-looking management to ensure intergenerational equity and environmental sustainability.

The findings provide several practical implications for policymakers, public institutions, and environmental management authorities in Albania. First, public policies should prioritize integrated natural

resource governance, linking economic planning with environmental protection and rural development. Second, investment in monitoring systems, digital technologies, and resource-efficient practices can improve management quality, but such measures should be supported by clear legal frameworks and accountable institutions. Third, the emphasis on forests, water, and land suggests that policies should prioritize ecosystem services, land-use planning, water management, and forest protection. These measures can help transform natural resources into a source of sustainable growth rather than short-term exploitation.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on respondents' perceptions and therefore captures assessments rather than direct measurements of natural resource performance. Second, the sample was selected through a non-probability purposive strategy and refers only to Albania; therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all contexts without caution. Third, the cross-sectional design and the use of a simple regression model do not allow causal conclusions. The results should be interpreted as associations between perception-based variables. Future research should expand the model by including institutional trust, education, occupation, region, environmental awareness, and objective sustainability indicators. Comparative studies across regions would also help clarify whether perceptions differ according to local resource endowments and governance conditions.

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POSTRZEGANIE ZNACZENIA ZASOBÓW NATURALNYCH DLA ROZWOJU GOSPODARCZEGO ALBANII

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem badania była ocena sposobu postrzegania zasobów naturalnych jako strategicznego czynnika rozwoju gospodarczego oraz określenie znaczenia polityki publicznej, zrównoważonego zarządzania, inwestycji i technologii w efektywnym wykorzystaniu tych zasobów. **Metody:** Badanie przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem ilościowej metody badawczej w formie sondażu ankietowego, obejmującego 200 respondentów z Albanii reprezentujących administrację publiczną, środowiska ekonomiczne i nauki o środowisku oraz inne grupy zawodowe. Do opisu wyników zastosowano statystykę opisową, a zależność między postrzeganym znaczeniem polityki publicznej a oceną wkładu zasobów naturalnych w zrównoważony rozwój gospodarczy zweryfikowano z wykorzystaniem modelu prostej regresji liniowej. **Wyniki:** Respondenci przypisują duże znaczenie zasobom naturalnym, w szczególności lasom, wodzie i gruntom. Jednocześnie badani podkreślili, że warunkiem ich efektywnego i zrównoważonego wykorzystania jest skuteczna realizacja polityki publicznej, odpowiedni poziom inwestycji oraz wdrażanie innowacyjnych technologii. Analiza regresji wykazała silną, dodatnią i statystycznie istotną zależność między oceną polityki publicznej a postrzeganym wpływem zasobów naturalnych na zrównoważony rozwój gospodarczy. **Wnioski:** Zgodnie z wynikami badań zasoby naturalne mogą stanowić istotny czynnik długookresowego rozwoju gospodarczego pod warunkiem funkcjonowania spójnych i trwałych ram polityki publicznej, skutecznej koordynacji instytucjonalnej, wdrażania zasad zrównoważonego zarządzania zasobami oraz wykorzystania nowoczesnych technologii.

Słowa kluczowe: zasoby naturalne, rozwój gospodarczy, zrównoważone zarządzanie, polityka publiczna, zarządzanie zasobami, zrównoważony rozwój gospodarczy