

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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A SWOT Analysis of Parks and Recreation System in Tirana

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Abstract

This study presents a SWOT analysis of the Parks and Recreation System in the city of Tirana, Albania. The methodology we employ includes desk research and inputs from local government institutions in charge of park management and maintenance. Following the SWOT analysis, we identify strategic options for the development of recreation sectors. We emphasize that more efforts should be given to activities aiming at gaining the trust of the population and civil society. Communication strategies with citizens should be conducted through information and awareness campaigns or through information technology. A formal methodology for appraising and prioritizing projects is also needed, in order to identify and implement those projects that give the highest benefits in terms of costs. The practice is hindered by budgetary constraints. More financing options can be exploited through the involvement of the private sector in recreation programs.

Keywords: Parks, recreation, SWOT analysis, strategic planning, environment, urbanization, Albania

JEL classification: Q56, Q57, Q58

1. Introduction

Parks and recreation systems are important parts of the infrastructure of a city. They are known to create values for the citizens as they improve their physical and mental health. They also promote a healthy living and societal relationship, by becoming meeting places among peers. Establishing good areas for recreation activities is therefore one of the main goals of local governments. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the recreation system of the city of Tirana, including the availability and infrastructure of civic parks within the city. A SWOT analysis of the parks and recreation of the city supports the findings and also offers paths of improvement of the recreation system of the city.

The paper is organized as follows. The first part of the paper reviews the literature regarding values of parks and recreation activities, as well as the use of SWOT analysis for the purposes of analyzing strategic management of parks and recreation system throughout the world. The second part of the paper presents the case study of Tirana. It starts by presenting the historic development of the city throughout the transition period, emphasizing the

battle between construction and the environment during the urbanization area. Then the SWOT analysis of parks and recreation system of the city is developed and, based on it, further discussions and recommendation are drawn.

2. Literature review

2.1. The value of parks and recreation in an urbanizing world

Parks and recreation systems include parks, civic spaces, conservation areas, trails and greenways, historic and cultural sites, storm water ponds, and other lands owned and managed by public agencies. City parks are the most well-known, as they contribute to the wellbeing and recreation of the citizens, making their everyday life more pleasant. Moreover, they improve the landscape of the city making it more attractive.

Parks are part of the ecosystem. This system offers several environmental, economic and social benefits. Groot, Wilson, & Boumans, identify functions of environmental goods, and distinguish them between regulatory, career, production and information

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functions[19]. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) categorizes four broad groups of ecosystem services: conservation services, regulatory services, cultural services, and support services[22]. Costanza et al., further detailed ecosystem services into 17 major categories [15].

The economic benefits of parks are several. The presence of a park or recreation facility within a touristic site improves the tourists experience in the site, creating esthetic or escapist experiences [40,21]. A popular park motivates more businesses to open near the site, thus affecting employment. Links between recreation sites, tourism activities and economic development are observed in a wide range of literature (see for example [17, 41, 7]). In addition, it is well known and broadly addressed in empirical studies that the value of real estates is higher if a park is in their proximity. Crompton offers a thorough review of empirical research on the relationship between property values and proximity to parks [16]. The relationship is discussed also by Engström & Gren [20]. Parks developments are usually financed by environmental taxes, which are know for their double dividend effect: the use of environmental taxes incentivizes polluters to reduce environmental damages at lower costs, while reducing the level of other distortionary taxes, such as income, payroll, and sales taxes, which distort labor supply and saving decisions [25, 24, 30, 36]. Finally, parks, as other environmental services, offer production functions and career functions, which in turn contribute to employment and production level of the country [18]. In relation to environmental impacts, more parks contribute to obtaining cleaner air, safer drinking water, and lower energy consumption. Through parks, many regulatory functions of the environment are achieved, such as biodiversity preservation, flooding control, air pollution improvement, noise control, carbon sequestration and traffic congestion control [13, 54].

Finally, parks and recreation facilities offer many social benefits, such as alleviation of the level of stress, motivation for a healthy lifestyle, reduction of chances for deviant behavior in youth, promotion of education, reduction of unemployment, and preservation and promotion of historical and cultural sites [8,14,55,39]. A great amount of studies took into consideration the relationship between long-term mental health and the presence of residential green and blue spaces. The general finding is that the

characteristics of the green and blue spaces (quantity, quality and distance) and the way people use of these spaces promote better mental health [26]. Further studies show that people consider the feelings and the emotions evoked in the park as very important for their well-being. The need to experience nature and to escape from the stressful rhythm of the city is considered one of the most important reason why people visit parks [14]. The urban design and environmental features of the parks influence also the potential for physical activity [46,48]. There is more and more awareness regarding the role that the informal outdoor recreation is playing in public health [55]. Finally, parks are considered as a place for meetings between people and this is one of the most important social and collective function of the city [27].

However, the ability of parks to produce their full potential has been compromised by the massive urbanization that big cities experience. In 2018, an estimated 55.3 per cent of the world's population lived in urban settlements. By 2030, urban areas are projected to house 60 per cent of people globally and one in every three people will live in cities with at least half a million inhabitants [51]. Despite the positive impact on the economy, productivity and infrastructure, the expected urbanization will cause green areas to shrink and be less available. The increase in urban density leads to the decrease of the amount of private backyards, gardens, and consequently in loss of green areas within the city. This on the other hand will increase the demand for public green spaces, as people who live in denser environments with little access to private greenspace will necessarily rely on neighborhoods public parks and other greenspaces more [13].

2.2. Strategic planning and decision-making for parks and recreation

The process of setting strategic objectives and decision making should ideally be supported by a solid analytical framework. The SWOT analysis (or SWOT matrix) is a strategic planning technique used to help an organization identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with its activity. It aims to specify the objectives of an organization and identify internal and external factors that are favorable and unfavorable for achieving these objectives. Strengths and weaknesses are usually related to the internal problems associated with the system, while opportunities and risks are usually focused on the

external environment. Identifying and conducting the SWOT analysis is important because it can inform the subsequent steps in planning to achieve strategic objectives [35].

The SWOT analysis can also be used to identify paths and objectives of development of a specific sector. Many studies have used the SWOT analysis for identifying strategic development paths of parks and recreation system. Most of this literature is focused on specific national parks and their strategic development. Hong & Chan used a SWOT analysis to prove the potentials and opportunities for ecotourism and to identify strategic management options in the Penang National Park in Malaysia [29]. Sayyed, Mansoori, & Jaybhaye, tried similarly using SWOT to identify the potential for ecotourism in Tandooreh National Park (Iran) [47]. Both studies proposed strategies and solution to achieve tourism goals in these national parks. A SWOT analysis of the well-known winter touristic site of Kapaonik (Serbia) was used by Bojovic & Plavska to assess the real situation of tourism in the area, to identify new opportunities and to recommend ways to address some of the disadvantages and shortcomings of the site [10]. They recommended the further development of the park through many strategies, including extending the ski season, and emphasizing summer tourism.

Other studies focused on broader urban and rural areas have been subject to the SWOT method with the aim of developing strategic tools for a whole system. Yazici & Bahriye Gülgün Aslan, identified the strong potential of Başkale (Van) County (Turkey) and its surroundings for the enhancement of rural tourism [57]. They used the SWOT analysis to investigate this potential and concluded that rural tourism development was inhibited because of the residents' lack of consciousness, inadequate budget, lack of entrepreneurship in the area and inefficient promotional activities. Mondal uses the SWOT analysis to identify the strategies to pursue in order to develop opportunities for the tourism sector in Bangladesh [38]. Their results showed that existing tourism activities in Bangladesh are unsustainable. They propose different WT (weaknesses- threats) strategies such as: ensuring safety and security of tourists, effective planning for sustainable economic benefits, strict implementation of environmental regulations for ecological sustainability, averting people about the importance of sustainable tourism

development, and developing infrastructure. Another use of the SWOT analysis to identify the future opportunities and threats from urban sprawl to a particular wastewater system in the city of Kolkata (India), is offered by Banerjee & Dey [4]. They analyze the risks of the natural sewage and rainwater disposal practices from recent urbanization of the area. They carry out a SWOT analysis of this eco-service to illustrate the present benefits of the system, as well as the threats to its future sustainability. Hatefi uses the SWOT analysis to identify strategies of development of the transportation system in Shahrkord (Iran), in order to propose measure that ensure its sustainability and environmental compliance [28]. The driver for their study is the lack of available plans for sustainable transportation, and the poor status of transportation infrastructure, issues that have inflicted serious problems in the city, including environmental pollution, traffic jams, and car accidents. Finally, in an analysis of benefits from urban parks, Neisiani, Seyedan, & Radfar conduct a SWOT analysis to offer some suggestions for urban management [39].

SWOT is a powerful tool in the decision making process. All studies reviewed benefited by its use, and its results, which lead to better judgment and more informed planning. SWOT can be further supported by additional tools that assist the process of planning and decision making, such as the cost-benefit analysis. The final goal of such instruments is the ability of decision makers to prioritize the options and support the process.

3. Methods and materials

We employ a case study research for achieving the purposes of our study, using Tirana, the capital of Albania, as the context for developing the SWOT analysis. The next sessions will present firstly the background information on urbanization trends and parks and recreation system of the city. Then the SWOT analysis is presented based on a large set of data that we have reviewed and used.

3.1. Case study of Tirana: Urbanization trends

The city of Tirana in its geographical form is surrounded by Dajti Mountain in the East, a range of low hills in the South and is decreasing in altitude toward North-West direction (Figure 1). During the

last 30 years, Tirana experienced a drastic growth in population and dramatic changes in its shape, morphology and urban structure. According to the Institute of Statistics, the population living in Tirana

before the 1990 was 374,483 where 67.6% lived in the city [32]. In only 10 years, this population almost doubled in size, and by 2020 the population of the capital raised up to 906,166 habitants [56].



Figure 1: Location of Tirana and Albania in the Balkan region. Source: <https://geoport.al.gov.al/>

Before the 1990, the Executive Committee (nowadays the Municipality, or Local Government) determined the right of living in a city or a village and the right for a dwelling. The government decided on the distribution of the population following its policy to develop the rural areas as well. Every kind of building was well projected by the Institute of Construction, where the architects, urban planners, engineers etc., developed the masterplans of the cities, defining the buildings, roads, and every green area. The Albanian normative defined green areas as the surface of parks and gardens of residential complexes, parks and garden of the city, street vegetation and the greens surrounding social and public buildings [23]. (Fig. 2)

The amount of greenery was set for each citizen at 7 m²/ habitant, and was the same everywhere in the county. Before the '90, Tirana was developed as a city in which the landscape was a strong element guiding the city development and was a medium for shaping it [53]. The city core was a valley surrounded by greenery, forests, natural and artificial parks, agricultural, livestock fields and greenhouses. The city center was mostly built by single houses which resembled the ottomans houses: low one or two stores buildings surrounded by greenery and courtyards of different typologies.

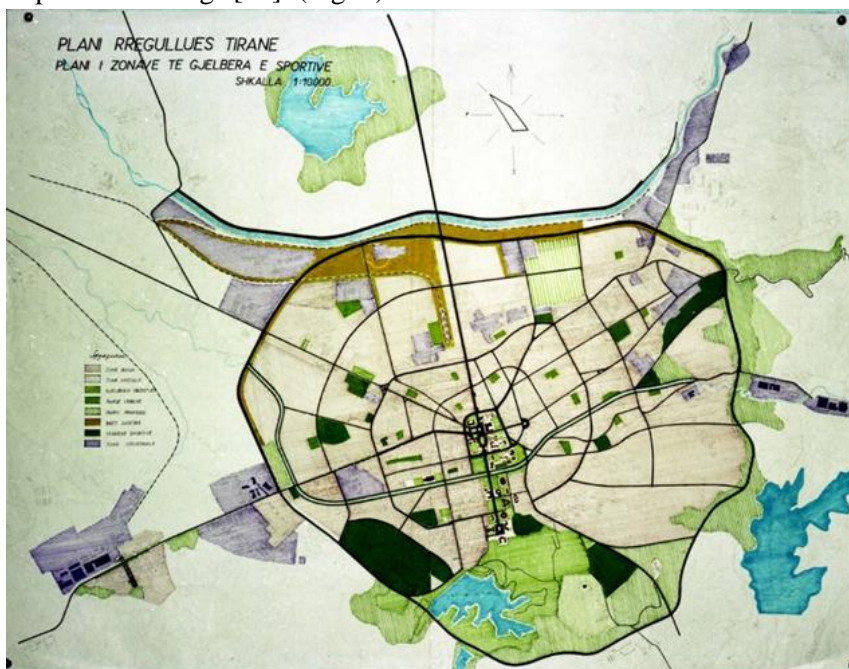


Figure 2. Regulatory Plan of Tirana in 1989-1990 . Source: Central Technical Archive of Construction

In 1990 dramatic changes happened in Albania, including governmental, political, economic, cultural and social reforms. Some of these drastic changes are thoroughly discussed by Aliaj, Lulo & Myftiu [1]. These changes affected also the urban sprawl and the

decrease of the open space areas, parks, green surfaces and public properties. The transition from a totalitarian regime to a free market economy brought a rapid urbanization of the city and massive construction (Figure 3).

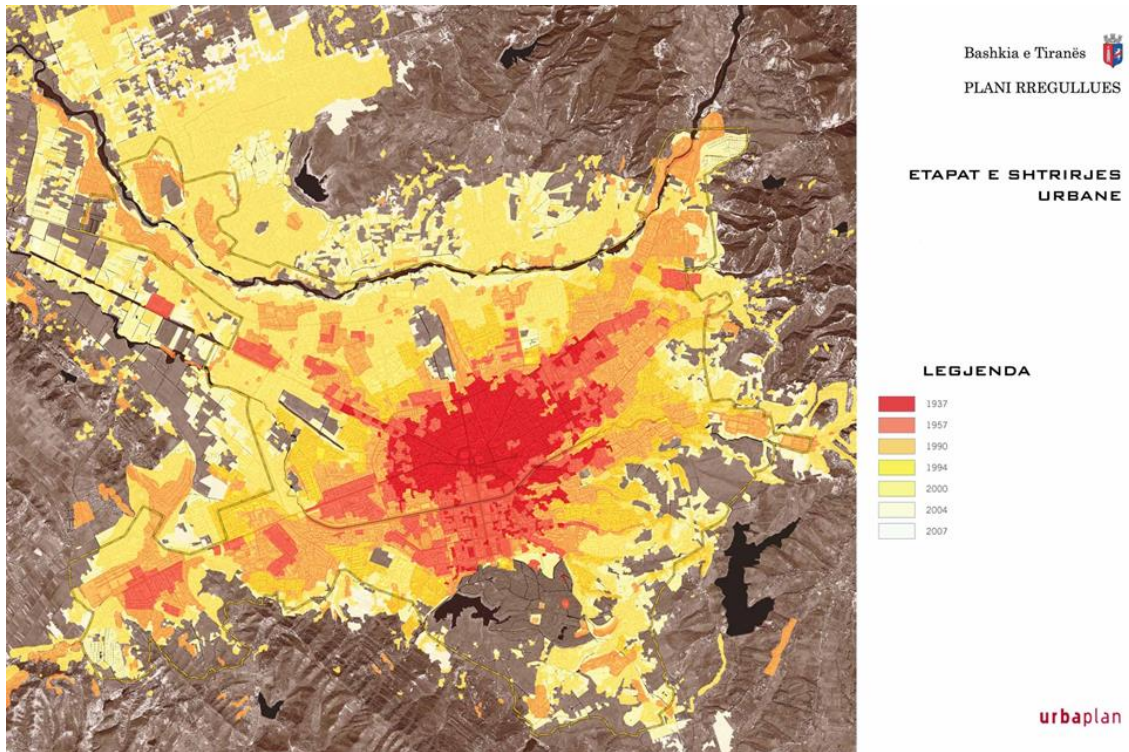


Figure 3. Urban sprawl patterns in Tirana from 1937 -2007. Source: Tirana Regulatory Plan progress, Municipality of Tirana & Urban Plan.



Figure 4. Tirana 2030. General Local Plan, Stefano Boeri. Representation of plans for the Orbital forest in Tirana. Source: <https://www.stefanoboeriarchitetti.net/en/news/tirana-general-local-plan/>

Open spaces and squares, especially within neighborhoods, have been constantly replaced with high store buildings. Such practice has been especially destructive when single buildings, instead of residential blocks, were placed within current neighborhoods. Tirana was transformed from a soviet-style garden city to a perpetual construction site [31]. The liberalization of the economy, the opportunities that the capital offered and the desire to profit from the city life, made Tirana a desirable venue for all Albanians, growing the city three times in population [43]. During the period 2016-2020, of the 4523 new construction in the country, 1461 were in Tirana [56]. This growth in urbanization came along with the cost of reduced green spaces. Teqja, Lekaj, Libohova & Bardhi estimate that about 27% of the territory of the city of Tirana is covered by greenery but the distribution is very heterogeneous [49]. The demographic movement happened in different directions. Most of the citizens built in open spaces, parks, and peripheral greenery. Formal and informal models were firstly introduced. Branko, Shameti & Veleshnja emphasize the lack of the preservation of natural environment and the uncontrolled extension towards the natural and peripheral settlements that characterized this process [12]. Of this same ideas are Lekaj and Teqja who emphasize that due to rapid urbanization, greenspace coverage has been changing from 2000 to 2018 [33]. Their investigation revealed that large areas of cultivated land in suburban areas of the main cities of the region were changed to other types of land cover, mainly artificial surface [33].

It is important to understand that the transformations, the expansion of the city toward the natural environment, and the explosion of massive constructions happened mostly in areas where the properties were still owned by the state, whom was unprepared and incapable about this new phenomenon, because of the lack of laws and control. In 2014, the government tried to implement a large territorial reform which intended to centralize the control in fewer municipalities. The General National Spatial Plan was determined and had a great impact and role on the strategies regarding the development of natural and semi-natural environments, the efficient use of all resources, the agricultural, rural developments, etc. In a proximal scale, several General Local Plans were introduced. The General Local Plan of Tirana (GLP TR30) followed an

interesting approach toward urban-sprawl trying to control the city contour by surrounding it with a dense physical green line of trees forming a natural forest surrounding the urbanized territory (figure 4). The core of the project developed by Stefano Boeri Architetti for the capital of Albania was a plan to reconquer the landscape: “This is the vision for the future of Tirana from the present to 2030” [9]. His main idea was to control the urban sprawl and to intensify and preserve the green remain areas of the capital. However, even nowadays “the Perimetral Park”, otherwise known as “Metrobosco” is still not well defined.

3.2. Case study of Tirana: Recreation system¹

Green areas in Tirana are classified into open parks and thematic parks (Table 1). Currently most of the parks and green areas of Tirana are administered by the Agency of Parks and Recreation (APR). The agency operates under the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Tirana. Its activities include the preservation and administration of existing parks, thematic and historical memorials, maintenance of parks and recreational spaces, development of cultural and sports activities for the benefit of the community, as well as creation of new parks [2].

Open parks in Tirana include the Artificial Lake Park, Youth Park (Parku Rinia), and the orbital forest of the city. The Artificial Lake Park is the most popular park of the city. It is situated in the Southern part of Tirana. The current area of the Park is 1'569'337 square meters, while that of the Artificial Lake is 450'000 square meters. It is the largest mass of greenery in the city of Tirana, defining the landscape and microclimate of the city. The park has been subject of many developments and improvements during the last years. New playgrounds, exercise sites, sports fields, support facilities for staff (office, warehouse, guard post), info points, decorative vegetation, have been established within the Park.

¹ Most data in relation to current situation of parks, their historical development and surface are gathered from the public web page of the Agency of Parks and Recreation <https://aprtirana.al/> and from the consultation process.

Table 1: Parks of Tirana based on their classification, Source: APR (2021)

Open Parks	Thematic Parks
Artificial Lake Park	Tirana Zoo
Youth Park	Botanical Garden
Orbital forest	Tirana Memorial Park
Farka Park	Peza Memorial Park
Vaqarr Park	
Kashar Park	

On the other hand, the threats of urbanization are evident and affect especially the border areas of the park; new construction and residential buildings located within the park edges have reduced the total green areas surrounding the park. Two studies regarding the Artificial Lake highlight the high values that visitors place to the size of green areas [34,49]. Intrusions within the park boundaries have been associated with public reaction. The first developments within the park were subject to protests by civil society, who argued against any type of intervention within the park, fearing the privatization of public properties. In 2016, groups of civil society and citizens opposed the construction of the first playground. The protest was addressed to the municipality and it encountered in more than one occasion violent confrontations between the police and the demonstrators [3]. However, after the inauguration of this first playground, the other developments of parks were generally well received by the citizens.

‘Youth Park’ (Parku Rinia) was the central public park of the capital, conceived in 1931 and built in 1949. In the framework of the master plan for the development of the center of Tirana and the decommissioning as a central city park, a role that has been assigned to Artificial Lake Park, the Municipality of Tirana is developing this green space into an urban park. Typical visitors to this park are residents of the surrounding areas, families with children in strollers, as well as residents who walk pets.

One of the big projects undertaken by the Municipality of Tirana for the greening of the suburban part of the city envisages the planting of 2 million new decorative plants, which will be part of the Green Crown of Tirana, otherwise known as the Orbital Forest. The development of the Orbital Forest faces many challenges, such as definition of property rights within its area. The administration and

maintenance body of the Orbital Forest has not been decided yet.

One large park on the outskirts of Tirana is the 1 km Park of the former Aviation Field. Mini-spaces for sports activities, fitness, basketball, volleyball, running tracks and children's playgrounds are located within the park.

With the objective of expanding green spaces in Tirana, three new parks are planned to be created and developed: Farka Park, Vaqarr Park and Kashar Park. The proximity of these sites to the city center, facilitate the development of these new recreational parks. The proposed territory for the development of these parks include areas of high biodiversity and landscape value, with strong tourist potential. The project is most advanced in Farka Park, while the development process of the two other parks is still undergoing. In line with the development of new parks and the establishment of new recreational opportunities in the city of Tirana, the City is evaluating also the identification, rehabilitation and promotion of other suburban recreational areas of Tirana, such as Lake Fjolla, etc., which contain important environmental, historical and cultural values.

Tirana Zoo, the Botanical Garden, and two memorial parks, one located in Tirana and one in Peza, represent the thematic parks of city. The Tirana Zoo, the only public zoo in Albania, was built in 1960-1961, based on a project designed by foreign consultants. It has a total area of 6.09 ha of which 1.3 ha are occupied by water basins. In addition, about 1 ha is occupied by the territories and buildings where the animals are housed and treated. The park was well maintained and an enjoyable recreation attraction before the 90'. It suffered lack of maintenance and degradation after the fall of communism, despite several plans envisaged for its improvement. After 2015, it became object of attention to the newly created Agency of Parks and Recreation. Since that period, particular care was taken for green spaces and general rehabilitation of

infrastructure, such as repairing and replacement of benches, etc. Increased attention was paid to hygiene and especially to the well-being and good nutrition of inherited animals. During these years, the interest of the public and the number of visitors to the zoo has significantly increased. According to financial statistics gathered from APR, compared to 2016, in 2017 the revenues from the park doubled. However, despite the developments, the infrastructure of the Zoo do not meet contemporary standards. The Municipality of Tirana has drafted a master plan for the rehabilitation of the park, which is currently under development.

The Botanical Garden of Tirana dates back to 1971 and covers an area of about 15 ha. It grows about 1,400 species and subspecies of plants. The garden administration is under the responsibility of the University of Tirana. It also serves schools throughout the country. The Botanical Garden regularly publishes the Seed Index and has relationships with about 160 Botanical Gardens worldwide. The garden is not only used for educational purposes, but also for social events. Many couples in the capital have their wedding ceremony associated in the premises of the Botanical Garden. With its nearly 2,000 exotic species, it is an important tourist attraction. Unfortunately, urban developments have affected this particular park as well. In 2011, the transfer of a part of the Botanical Garden under the administration of the Ministry of Public Works and the Directorate of Roads, in order to build the Great Ring Road of Tirana, was legalized with a decision. This decision was at the time also opposed by the civil society, students and citizens [42]. Despite the resistance, the project was finalized.

Besides the developments of the main parks of the city, during the 2015-2019, 45 additional recreational sites, including play grounds, exercise corners and sports fields were designed, developed or rehabilitated throughout the territory of the Municipality of Tirana. These include both existing rehabilitated squares and newly constructed ones. Such plans took into account the maximum use of available public spaces, modern design standards, geographical distribution by administrative units, population density and community needs. In addition, outdoor artistic activities, environmental and education activities, and sport activities are part of the recreation agenda of the city. Technology has helped promote and develop recreation activities. Tirana Ime Outdoor (TIO) is an

application launched in 2017 as an innovation that brings a service to help citizens and tourists find spaces (recreational squares and playgrounds, touristic and historical sites, hiking and cycling trails) and opportunities (activities) for recreation in Tirana.

3.3. Data and analysis

The data for developing the SWOT analysis include desk research and inputs from the Agency of Parks and Recreation (APR)[2]

Desk research consisted of a systematic review of literature, and review of main strategic documents related to parks and recreation system in Albania, including: the Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Municipality of Tirana 2018 - 2022 and the General Local Plan of the Municipality of Tirana (TR030).

In addition, all available electronic and online data in relation to the functioning and organization of parks and recreation system in Tirana were reviewed. Finally, the authors studied the demographic characteristics of the city of Tirana, as well as economic trends, to analyze the context for the development of parks and recreation system. The authors conducted also numerous meetings with representatives of APR, during a long process of consultation throughout 2019.

4. Results and Discussion: SWOT analysis about parks and recreation system in Tirana

A SWOT analysis outlining the different factors associated with the development of parks and recreation system in Tirana is shown in Table 2. Further discussions on each of the topics identified in the SWOT matrix are extended in the next sessions.

4.1. Strengths

Development of parks and recreation system in Tirana is enhanced by many factors which allow further exploitation of the potential of the city. Promotion of parks and recreation activities is an important part of the development strategy of the city of Tirana (Tirana 2030), which has targeted recreation as a main goal for the next five to ten years. Therefore, many efforts are targeting the development of new leisure activities, creation of new green areas, and their wide promotion. This practice has had a good impact on the perception of the population in relation to promotion of green areas, and environmental awareness. Consequently, acts of vandalism towards parks and

recreation objects, which were very frequent in the past, have become rare. Many restaurants and other culinary facilities, which offer a further motivation to visit the parks, are situated in their proximity. The main parks of Tirana (Artificial lake Park, “Youth Park”, Zoological and Botanical Garden) are reachable by public transportation, therefore are accessible to most of the population who wish to visit the parks. The demographic characteristics of Albanian population (characterized by a high share of young population) offer the possibility to promote many recreation activities suitable for young ages, who in turn would be more motivated to support policies and programs for green spaces and recreation, ensuring the future sustainability of policies in this field. The use of technology for promotion of recreation activities is a further friendly approach to this group of population. Finally, all urban parks have free entrance, therefore freely accessible by the population. Very low prices are applied for tickets of the Zoo and Botanical Garden.

4.2. Weaknesses

During the post-communist era, the parks and recreation system has suffered from competing priorities of the development of the country. This has

been especially true for Tirana. Tirana is a very urbanized city, where construction activities of any kind have predominated initiatives for increase of green areas. Such practice has made many neighborhoods to lack free open spaces to accommodate parks and squares. Consequently, even the new established parks and squares have been considered to be insufficient to cover the needs of the population.

Before the creation of APR, the management of parks and recreation activities have been have been a responsibility of several units in the Municipality, which competences often overlapped. Even though most of responsibilities have been defined, still some common duties and tasks between APR and different Municipal Units create occasionally confusion and delays in delivering the services. In addition, a lack in human resources and logistic capacities when it comes to maintenance activities is revealed as a concern. This causes occasionally poor maintenance of common spaces, especially playgrounds.

In relation to their accessibility, the public transport system offers good coverage. However, the transport infrastructure remains problematic, which causes citizens to not use public transport, thus hampering their access to public parks [44].

Table 2. SWOT analysis of the parks and recreation system in Tirana, Source: The Authors

Strengths	Weaknesses
Public Transport coverage	Overlapping competencies in relation to administration of green areas, open spaces, common goods, etc.
Demographics characteristics of Tirana	Low budgets for Recreation Activities
Marketing Strategies employed for recreation activities	Overdependence on donations and investor requests
Growing number of leisure activities	Few public spaces free of construction
Facilities in the proximity of parks	Lack of human resources
Role of recreation within the City Local Plan	Lack of equipment for mantainance activities
Future Plans for development of new green spaces	Transport infrastructure
Use of technology for promotion activities	Poor access to marginalized groups
Free entrance in most recreation sites	Lack of transparency in decision making
Opportunities	Threats
Increased tourism potential	Legal and property rights
Increased coverage of bike trails	Lack of political coherence and stability
Environmental awareness through education	Low level of public trust
Health promotion	Lack of equipment for mantainance activities
Innovation and use of ICT	Planning not in accordance with by demographic trends
New recreation activities to be exploited	Vandalization episodes of recreation infrastructure and parks
Financial funding from private sector	Urbanization
Training and motivation of staff	Impacts of Climate change
Addressing marginalized groups	
Global scale interest on green surfaces in urban areas.	

Source: The authors

The ability of marginalized groups to access the parks is a very serious concern. According to official Government of Albania statistics, there are over 143,000 officially registered people with disabilities in Albania. Disabled citizens experience high levels of unemployment, often lack access to basic medical and education opportunities, and suffer stigmatization and isolation from society [52]. While within the main parks, some categories of people with disabilities have access to parks facilities (for example within the Artificial Lake Park there are no steps within park areas and some recreation areas are designated for people in wheelchairs), still little has been done in relation to the provision of signals and adequate infrastructure for other categories of disabled people. In addition, and of more serious concern is the fact that the possibilities for disabled people to reach the parks and recreation areas are very limited. Public transport is still not suitable for enabling easy use from this group of population, street signals are inadequate or missing, and infrastructure is still not designated to adapt to the needs of marginalized groups.

A final weakness that the sector faces is the financing mechanisms. The activities of APR, including recreation activities and maintenance of existing and new parks, are financed by the Municipality budget, which remains very low. For instance, in 2018, Operating and other expenditures constitute 32% of the total budget of the municipality and consist of: Operating expenditures of the Municipality and subordinate institutions (including APR); Use of the Reserve Fund and the Contingency Fund; Other transfers for individuals [5]. Other activities and project are financed through donation. These donations take various forms such as: sponsorships, grants, humanitarian aid, cooperation agreements, etc. The amount of local donation targeting recreation and greenspaces in the budgetary program 2018-2020 is 16% of all donations [6]. In addition, the APR generates own incomes from: renting different facilities, such as the Tirana Amphitheater, income from zoo tickets, fees and rent paid from the lands (pastures). However, low levels of budgets are a concern for the agency and limit its development potential.

Decision making regarding new projects is often conditioned by requests from specific stakeholders and is not based on a rational cost-benefit analysis.

Rather is a request from politicians, influence groups or donors to select projects of particular interests. This causes the development and targeting of activities that are not really needed for the moment, but rather create a good impression to the public. Such practices impact public trust, and often are the triggers of protests and discontent.

4.3. Opportunities

Tirana is becoming an increasingly touristic hotspot destination internationally. The image of a rapidly urbanizing post-communist capital, has made the city a preferred tourism destination, especially for young travelers. The country is also very attractive for low-budget travel. This potential is very important for the development of parks and recreation system. The tourist visits are a further motivation for development of new green spaces and recreation activities and can serve at their promotion worldwide. Furthermore, new ideas for development of new recreation activities can be gained from this group.

The development and promotion of green spaces and recreation activities can be further used to promote health and environmental awareness throughout the population. Educational activities can be organized in this regard, which apart their primary purpose, can further promote the green programs to the population. Currently a completely new system of bike trails is being developed in Tirana. This development can further ease the accessibility of parks, for those who do not like public transportation or when the public transport does not offer good connection to the park.

In relation to the system administration, despite the fact that there is a lack in human resources, the people currently working for the system within the municipality and APR are highly motivated in doing their job. The staff members are experienced and liked their job, and aim at substantially improving the condition of the city. Trainings and campaigns for staff development are further needed for maintaining the quality and devotion of staff.

There are many unexploited possibilities to target and develop activities that address marginalized groups, even though these should be based on studies of needs and characteristics of the population.

In relation to financing, apart from current financial sources, new innovative ways can be considered. Increasingly in the domestic context, developers (the private sector) are required to contribute to the cost of public goods, which were previously financed by

general tax revenues. The development of new financing mechanisms, which aim at financing the cost of public goods has become a general objective of international environmental policies [11,37, 45]. Some approaches to innovative funding can focus on: development obligations, entry fees, and locally focused initiatives between the private sector, government authorities, and NGOs. These are considered as tools that can fill the gaps left by budget funds for the environment, providing sustainable funding for environmental objectives in general, and parks and recreation in particular.

Finally, new and innovative ways to use information technology for the purposes of promotion of parks and recreation activities, can be further developed. The use of ITC for promotion of recreation activities attract more people, especially youth, facilitates the spread of information and help making activities more attractive.

4.4. Threats

The threats that the system of parks and recreation faces are mostly related to legal issues, political intervention, development priorities of the city and population attitude toward activities aiming at park and recreation development. The issue of definition of property rights cause many uncertainties when plans for new parks are conceived. Areas for development of new parks often overlaps with private properties, whose owners are either in court claiming their ownership or expecting the clarification of its status. Therefore, the design of new parks is a very risky process.

Often new developments are subject to political attention, because opposition exploits these occasions to stimulate riots and raise controversy. Therefore, often new projects are faced with protests, social media attacks, and wide media coverage. Acts of vandalism are common during these protests.

A further threat is the continuous competition between investments in softscape and hardscape surfaces (in the construction field), often won by the later. Regularly high store buildings replace open spaces, a practice that further enhance the low trust that the population has for new recreational projects, new initiatives and programs from the local government.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The potential of development of parks and recreation activities in Tirana, is conditioned by several factors:

- competition between the urbanization agenda and the environmental agenda;
- low public trust in public investments and initiatives;
- unclear and overlapping competencies of managing units in charge of recreation and park development.

At the same time, the projects and plans of development of this sector in Tirana are quite ambiguous, and aim at creating the face of the city.

The SWOT analysis of Parks and recreation activities in Tirana can help to identify the strategic options for the development of these sectors, and support a further cost-benefit analysis of the most promising alternatives. The SWOT analysis identifies some of the possible strategies that can be adopted in relation to the development of the sector. Addressing the trust and action from civil society groups requires high level of communication with the public as well as information campaigns developed by amiable public figures. Public consultation process should be a pillar of the implementation of activities and projects. Communication with citizens could be conducted through information campaigns or through information technology, from instance through social networks.

Field research, including focus groups of representatives of the population, can also give a more sustained conclusion on which activities need to be developed first. Awareness campaigns are very appreciated activities that can help raise the image of local government authorities implementing such projects. A formal methodology for appraising and prioritizing projects based on cost-benefit analysis, SWOT analysis of different project, and environmental valuation methods is also needed. It allows solid decision making and the implementation of important project and plans that address community needs at best. The limited budgets of the local government units outline the necessity to rely on formal and solid methodology for the decision making process.

In relation to financing, further schemes and sources can be exploited. In Albania, the main instruments used for financing are national taxes, which generate revenue for the achievement of general environmental objectives. Plans and strategies for managing parks or recreational activities require funding to be implemented, and these funds generally come from national and local budget allocations. However, today

the inadequacy of the state budget to cover the costs of long-term plans and programs is emphasized. Therefore, other funding mechanisms should be carefully considered, always taking into account the social, economic and demographic characteristics of the country. The involvement of private sector, through innovative financing means, such as entry fees, user fees, swap contracts, contingency credit and development conditions, payment for ecosystem services, are some of the opportunities that can be considered after careful assessment. These are considered as tools that can fill the gaps left by budget funds for the environment, providing sustainable funding for environmental objectives.

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