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The Greek wildfires: What went wrong and what can be fixed?

An executive state and an elite whose priority is profit-making cannot lead the way in the struggle against wildfires.

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A man watches the flames as a wildfire approaches Kochyli beach near Limni village on the island of Evia in Greece on August 6, 2021 [Thodoris Nikolaou/AP]

For a third week wildfires are burning in Greece and there seems to be no end in sight for this summer of disaster. Attica is ablaze once again, this time in the southeast, and fires are burning near Sounio and northwest of Athens at Vilia.

Firefighters are up against a 20km fire front. People are fleeing their homes once again and many are afraid that this will critically affect the environment and air quality of the capital city, Athens.

During the past month, over 58 major wildfires broke out across Greece, destroying a quarter of a million acres of forests. The number of fires this year is 26 percent above the average of the past 12 years, but the area burned dwarfs the average by a staggering 450 percent, fitting a pattern of destruction that is now seen across the Mediterranean region.

The northern part of Evia island became the showcase of global climate collapse for a week this August, as nearly a quarter of the island burned. But the magnitude of the destruction cannot be attributed to the climate crisis alone.

The Greek civil protection authorities failed to respond to the challenge adequately because of the lack of a prevention plan. Underfunding the forest protection services also resulted in limited operational capability during the wildfires.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis attributed the disaster to climate change, admitted government failure, and apologised for it, but still defended his government's strategy, suggesting that Greece now has gained a "culture of evacuations".

Mitsotakis asked the people to remain optimistic, promising relief and seeing an "opportunity" in this disaster. But for many Greeks, his government's policy so far has been fuelling the problem, and certainly, no relief plan can bring back life as it was, especially in rural areas like northern Evia.

In Evia and Attica, many saw their properties burn to the ground with no one to defend them. Complaints by residents and municipal authorities that aerial support and firefighters were absent from this battle were widely reported by the Greek media.

Forest fires burn in Greece every summer. So why was the administration so unprepared to deal with them? Why was the Greek civil protection plan so poorly managed?

'Culture of evacuations'

On July 23, 2018, Mati, a holiday resort and beachfront exurb of Athens, was incinerated by a wildfire that killed 103 people, an horrific reminder of the kind of phenomena that the climate crisis can and will inflict on Greece. It was the first event directly related to the climate crisis that affected everyday life on a local scale.

Thousands of vehicles, homes and trees burned to the ground. According to a study by the University of Athens, the tragedy in Mati was an unprecedented event: wind gusts blew at 120 kp/h, creating a firestorm that wiped out everything in its path in about two hours.

Residents and visitors could not evacuate from the area despite their frantic efforts because of the chaotic and unplanned urban environment. Operational mismanagement and a corrupt local administration had allowed the development of a labyrinth of illegal buildings that were difficult to navigate.

When fires started burning near the suburb of Varibobi on the outskirts of Athens this August, the parallel with Mati was unavoidable. Again, a residential area where illegal construction had gone on for years and where an adequate protection plan was missing was threatened by a blaze.

This time, no winds blew, the order to evacuate was given quickly and no lives were lost. Commenting on the evacuation orders, Prime Minister Mitsotakis said: "Houses can be rebuilt and trees will grow again, but human life cannot be replaced."

However, ordering people to leave their homes without sending adequate fire fighting forces allows the fire to flare up and destroy everything in its path – not just the forest, but also all social and economic life that depends on it. Northern Evia was home to forests with many ancient trees.

Locals lived in harmony with nature, as their livelihoods depended on the health of the forests. The island was a major producer of honey and pine resin.

That is why in some places people defied evacuation orders and in some cases, were able to defend their properties against the blaze and save them.

Volunteers in the village of Kamatriades in Evia, for example, took collective action and confronted the wildfires together. In a media report that went viral, a 19 year old explained how he confronted the fire with his friends to defend Pefki, a small village in the northern part of Evia island. “If I don’t defend my village, I will have no choice but to go to the city and seek a life there as a labourer,” the young man said.

Government failures

There are lessons to learn from this inferno and the COVID-19 pandemic. When COVID-19 hit the Greek public health system, decimated by a decade of austerity and budget cuts, the government reacted swiftly by shutting down all social activity, a measure highly effective at first but problematic in the long run, as it undermined the economy, bypassed constitutional rights and even undermined public health in some ways.

The reaction to the megafires of this summer was similar. Evacuations saved lives but did not avert the worst ecological destruction this country has seen in decades, which will inevitably have enormous socioeconomic repercussions.

During the past two years, the government focused on hiring police officers and upgrading the police vehicle fleet, but paid less attention to other civil protection services, creating a vulnerability that played out dramatically this summer.

The European emergency number 112 achieved the most important goal of saving lives. But the “culture of evacuations” was perceived by many as an unacceptable surrender to the forces of nature.

After the disaster of 2018, the government of then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras invited an international committee run by Johann Goldammer, a fire expert who heads the Global Fire Monitoring Center, to come up with a new civil protection plan, with the agreement of all political parties at the time.

One of the major findings of the report the committee produced was that fire protection should be directed by an independent authority, or a coordination committee that would bring all other services, local authorities and volunteers together for effective wildfire protection.

A version of this plan was implemented in Portugal, reducing wildfire-affected areas. Mitsotakis’s conservative government may have maintained an operational continuity in the police and the fire service since the Mati disaster since gaining office, but it created an administrative and political discontinuity by holding back landmark projects, such as the forest map registry and the cadaster, and ignoring the Goldammer plan.

On August 12, the prime minister explained that civil protection and security are among the responsibilities of government and should not be handed to an independent body – disagreeing with a central strategic proposal of the Goldammer committee.

Executive state

For most conservatives, nature is reduced to terrain for economic development, while respect for the environment is treated as an externality.

In this vein, Mitsotakis claimed that the current fires were an “unprecedented attack by nature” and announced a build-up of civil protection services with the generous funding of the

European recovery plan. He insisted on the current philosophy of civil protection provided by the so-called “executive” state, where power is concentrated in the prime minister’s office.

Mitsotakis also announced a relief package, and a regeneration plan that includes the “adoption” of forests by associations or private companies that will implement rapid reforestation projects as part of their social responsibility plans, and a new master plan for the touristic development of Evia.

However, this package will address only the short-term impact of the fires on the economy - something the government is worried about, especially after Moody’s Investors Service issued a report about Greece’s economic fragility in the face of climate change.

The long-term strategy for minimising climate change effects, however, seems to be missing.

That is hardly surprising given that Mitsotakis’s government has sped up projects that may have negative effects on the environment and local societies more than any government in the past.

Last year, the government voted on a bill that “minimises bureaucracy” for energy investments in protected areas. The bill was slammed by Greenpeace and the WWF for removing measures and limitations meant to protect the environment.

A year ago, during a visit to the island of Corfu to inaugurate a large hotel project in the Natura 2000 protected Erimitis habitat, the prime minister mentioned that it would be better to build on the protected area because “eventually, it is going to burn”.

When asked about this on TV, the minister for economic development, Adonis Georgiadis, wondered aloud if a beautiful forest is preferable to a forest profitable to the local city’s budget. The forest at Erimitis went up in flames a month after these statements.

In other words, in the minds of conservatives, the idea of protecting the environment is inextricably connected to profit-making.

Social empowerment

According to the recently released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, the climate crisis is now out of control, and for many of its consequences, there is no going back any more.

The report’s message is clear: we need to rethink how we organise social and economic activities to protect future generations from an ever-changing climate.

This year’s wildfires in Greece and elsewhere in the region have proven once again that this process of fundamental change needs to empower local communities to defend the environment.

In a recent interview, Goldammer stressed the need to place more emphasis on prevention, give attention to urban sprawl into forest landscapes and seek a greater engagement of civil society.

Indeed, there can be no better protection for the environment than one that includes the communities that live in the ecosystems that need protection.

The challenge that climate change poses necessitates a reset in the balance of power between the state and the citizens, where the latter become an active part of governance and climate action.

We cannot rely on market forces to protect the environment because they will not.

In Greece, however, the empowerment of citizens seems a distant prospect as the government sees everything through a narrow neoliberal lens.

This, coming as rapid action is urgently required, does not bode well for the near future.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.