

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE ORGANIZATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES

Associate Professor Ph.D., Cristina GANESCU
“Constantin Brancoveanu” University of Pitesti, Romania
E-mail: cristina_ganescu@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Sustainable development is the one that can ensure a balance between socio-economic systems and natural potential, through strategies and plans that contribute to solving the multiple problems that economic activities have generated and continue to generate. In the conditions of increasing pressure on the environment and the existence of a real competition for resources, between countries and enterprises, it is necessary to reach a cooperative relationship between industry, the largest consumer of resources, and the environment. Enterprises aware of the responsibility they have towards the environment, towards the community and towards shareholders adopt those strategies that ensure and maintain cooperative relationships with the environment, thus becoming increasingly competitive.*

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1. Introduction

In the continuous attempt to achieve economic growth and progress at any cost, man has ignored, very often, the fact that he is part of the natural system and has intervened in this system, exceeding its support capacity. Thus, imbalances have emerged whose effects are already being felt, with worldwide concerns becoming increasingly intense in order to prevent, counteract and reduce these disastrous repercussions.

In this context, sustainable development is the one that can ensure a balance between socio-economic systems and natural potential, through strategies and plans that contribute to solving the multiple problems that economic activities have generated and continue to generate.

2. The concept of sustainable development

One of the first moments that favored the emergence of the concept of sustainable development was the United Nations Conference in Stockholm in 1972. During this event, the problems of pollution, resource destruction, environmental deterioration, the danger of species extinction and the need to increase people's living standards were highlighted, accepting the indissoluble link between the quality of life and the quality of the environment for current and future generations (The United Nations, 1972): "If current trends of world population growth, industrialization, environmental contamination, food production and resource depletion continue, this planet will reach the limits of growth within the next 100 years. The most likely result would be a sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity". The conclusion was that the neoclassical development model practiced at that time could not be sustained in the long term.

Subsequently, in 1986, the World Commission on Environment and Development was created within the United Nations, with the aim of analyzing the dynamics of environmental deterioration and providing solutions regarding the long-term viability of human society. This commission also provided the most famous definition of sustainable development through the report "Our Common Future" (Brundtland Report): "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (The United Nations, 1987). At the Rio Summit in 1992, the issues of environment and economic

development were again highlighted (The United Nations, 1992). Agenda 21 identified two major directions of action: the development and promotion of sustainable production and consumption patterns; and the improvement and restructuring of the decision-making process for the simultaneous integration of ecological and socio-economic aspects. Recommendations related to consumption patterns referred to: assessing the relationship between production and consumption, the environment, technological innovation, economic growth, development and demographic factors; analyzing changes in the structure of industry to achieve economic growth with reduced material intensity; examining how economic growth and prosperity can be achieved simultaneously with reducing energy and material consumption and reducing the generation of harmful substances. Developing countries must ensure that the basic needs of the poor are met, avoiding unsustainable, environmentally harmful patterns. “The main cause of the continuing deterioration of the global environment is unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, especially in industrialized countries, which are a cause for concern, increasing poverty and imbalances” (Agenda 21, 1992). It was only in 2002 that the progress made towards sustainable development was reviewed at the Johannesburg Summit and the commitment to continue the process in the future was reaffirmed (The United Nations, 2002).

The issue of sustainable development is also a priority at the European Union level (European Commission, 2019). Since 2001, the European Sustainable Development Strategy has been adopted, together with a set of Sustainable Development Indicators, with the aim of monitoring the implementation of this strategy. In 2006 this strategy was revised, adopting a new governance model (European Union Council, 2006), with the aim of “identifying and developing actions that will enable the European Union to achieve a continuous improvement in the quality of life, both for present and future generations, by creating sustainable communities, capable of managing and using their resources efficiently, as well as of exploiting the innovative social and ecological potential of the economy, ensuring prosperity, environmental protection and social cohesion” (European Union Council, 2006).

“Sustainable development is a core principle of the Treaty on European Union and a priority objective for the EU's internal and external policies. The United Nations 2030 Agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” (European Commission, 2025).

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, adopted in 2015, offer a comprehensive road map for global sustainability. Three guiding principles are essential: staying within planetary ecological limits, fostering economic growth that does not degrade the environment, and ensuring governance structures that uphold fairness and justice (EIPA, 2025, p.4).

In this context, it is necessary to support innovation and collaboration between states, organizations and communities for a better future for this world and for ecological growth. The “Rio+20 Corporate Sustainability Forum: Innovation and Collaboration for the Future We Want”, organized by the United Nations in 2012, aimed to identify a better level and quality of sustainable practices of organizations, stimulate the diffusion of sustainable innovations and cooperation between companies, governments, civil society and the United Nations. The signal sent to the global community is that we need solutions launched on a large scale for the transition to an economic order based on growth, which contributes to the reduction of poverty and social injustices and which, at the same time, preserves natural resources for future generations.

3. Competition versus cooperation in the sustainable use of resources – challenges for socially responsible enterprises

We might ask how enterprises can get involved through social responsibility practices in supporting these objectives? Given the increasing pressure on the environment and the existence of a real competition for resources, between countries and enterprises, it is necessary to reach a cooperative relationship between industry, the largest consumer of resources, and the environment.

It is true that the world of business and relations between economies or organizations is based on competition, respectively on competitiveness. Supporting competition is explainable by the indisputable advantages it confers: better and cheaper products and services, diversity in creating the offer, motivations in supporting innovation and research. For organizations, competition is a powerful motivating factor in order to increase economic and social performance. Many business people believe that the only concern of enterprises should be to identify viable and efficient solutions to increase their capacity to face the increasingly fierce competition on the domestic and international markets.

Concerned only with increasing profits, some enterprises ignore their responsibilities towards the community or the environment, considering that adopting this type of activities would only lead to a decrease in profits. “This simplistic perception implies the idea that, due to competition, a good manager has no other option in the market economy than to buy as cheaply as possible and sell as expensively as possible. The existence of a legal framework that must be respected is accepted, without enthusiasm, but that is all: within the limits of the law, everything is permitted in order to achieve the sole goal of any serious business: maximizing profits” (Crăciun, 2005, p.203).

“Competition is an active form of free initiative, representing open confrontation, rivalry between economic agents to attract customers” (Moşteanu, 2000, p.31). It plays a major role in business, leading to continuous improvement and efficiency of production, eliminating waste and reducing costs, so that the selling price is lower than others (Ganescu, 2011, p.132). The factors that determine industrial competition, the ways in which companies gain and sustain competitive advantage and the principles on which they develop their own strategies represent the core of competition (Porter, 2008).

The environment, urban poverty, income inequality and health, among others, are normally problems of society. However, each of these is closely related to the economic environment and, in particular, to competition. Porter (2008) considered that it is a matter of time to identify the most appropriate solutions to solve these problems, namely the ability to effectively apply the most profound lessons of competition. Approaching the real problems of the community, the environment and the health of the population represents nothing but important opportunities for gain for both parties, society and companies. The attitude of some business people oriented towards maximizing profit to the detriment of others leads only to obtaining an opposite effect, namely to reducing the expected benefits (Crăciun, 2005). Fair competition is one of the first conditions for increasing the wealth of nations, making possible the fair distribution of goods and services within society.

Even though the benefits of competition and competitiveness are well-known and sufficiently strong, it is demonstrated that within any organization, economic, social and environmental objectives can be mutually supportive, thus contributing to increased long-term competitiveness. “Investment in human, social and environmental capital, as well as technological innovation, are conditions for long-term competitiveness and economic

prosperity, for social cohesion, quality jobs and environmental protection” (European Union Council, 2006). In this context, it is increasingly important for organizations and governments to make efforts to “enhance social dialogue, corporate social responsibility and public-private partnerships to promote the cooperation and shared responsibilities necessary to achieve sustainable consumption and production” (European Union Council, 2006). On the other hand, “at least in the coming decades, a significant reformulation of the cultural matrix in relation to the reduction of consumption, including due to the role of profit, is not foreseeable” (Ioan-Franc, 2006, p.14).

At the level of the European Union, the importance of transforming the European economy into a sustainable economy by 2050 is recognized, by identifying the economic sectors that consume the most resources and by instruments and indicators aimed at guiding the actions of governments and enterprises. “The current model of economic development in the world represents an increasing pressure on the finite natural resources of the planet and leads to harmful accumulations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and of numerous pollutants in the environment. It also does not create the conditions for satisfactory employment of the workforce and for general well-being for everyone” (Economic and Social Council, 2012).

These highly topical issues are of intense concern to the world community. As early as 1999, the United Nations Consumer Protection Guide included a chapter entitled “Promoting the Sustainable Use of Resources”. In November 2011, 350 managers from Business 20 around the world debated a report that set out “concrete measures to enhance growth in a sustainable, balanced and beneficial manner for all market players”. These managers recommended, among other things, “adapting global governance to new realities”, not only by establishing better coordination of economic policies, but also by redefining the mandates of certain international organisations”. Also in 2012, three of the most important international companies, Nike, Yahoo and Best Buy, founded Green Xchange, an innovative, revolutionary partnership that brought together companies, people and ideas to create sustainable change.

Sustainable use of resources is viewed differently in developing countries than in developed ones. Thus, in developing countries, where often there are not enough accessible resources to meet basic needs, sustainable use aims at more efficient use of resources. In developed countries, where resource use is often excessive, the emphasis is on changing consumption patterns to achieve reduced use of materials and energy, as well as reduced consumption per functional unit. An example would be the orientation of consumer preferences towards environmentally friendly products.

Increasing competitiveness between states or between organizations should involve: continuing to develop and improve competitive markets for electricity, natural gas, oil, uranium, coal, energy services; promoting renewable sources; liberalizing energy transit and ensuring constant and non-discriminatory access of market participants to transmission and distribution networks; developing energy infrastructure. At the same time, cooperation between states and enterprises must be maintained; Depending on the level of development of countries, a series of differentiated approaches can be applied regarding economic and financial obligations for environmental protection at local, regional and international levels, with developed countries recognizing that they have a greater responsibility, including in terms of providing assistance to developing countries or emerging market economies (Zaman and Vasile, 2006, p.14).

We believe that it is beneficial for the two aspects, cooperation and competition, to work together because they contribute to improving economic and social conditions at the state level or even at the global level. Cooperation between enterprises and governments, but also the social solidarity manifested at the level of each community, play a role in increasing the prosperity of people and countries.

At the level of our country, through the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Romania 2030 (Romanian Government, 2020) concrete objectives are established for the transition to a development model generating high added value, based on knowledge and innovation, the continuous improvement of the quality of life and the harmonious relationship with the environment, but the expected results are not yet visible.

Organizations must be stimulated to implement the circular economy, a new concept based on the elimination of waste from the design phase, the use of consumable and durable components, and the use of energy from renewable sources. At the level of the European Union, a project has already been established aiming at “establishing incentives to encourage companies to adopt measures, establish evaluation criteria and continuously improve the efficient use of their own resources” (European Parliament, 2012). This project highlights the importance of research, development and innovation to accelerate the “transformation into a resource-efficient Europe” and the need to stimulate innovation and reduce energy consumption. A very detailed report by a group of experts presents scenarios for the adoption of a circular economy for European Union countries and estimates that the savings in terms of material costs will be significant.

Sustainable use of resources and pollution control can be applied by businesses in order to move towards a circular economy, by reducing the consumption of non-renewable resources, reusing and recycling (3R). Businesses aware of their responsibility towards the environment, the community and shareholders adopt those strategies that ensure and maintain cooperative relations with the environment, thus becoming increasingly competitive.

A first plan follows the relationship of the enterprise with the natural environment and aims to reduce the consumption of natural resources in the context of identifying alternative, non-polluting and environmentally friendly resources, and the second plan aims to adapt and improve the technological process so as to optimize energy consumption and make production more efficient. In relation to the social environment, the sustainable enterprise is the one that aims to offer consumers healthy, ecological products, thus ensuring premises for increasing the quality of life. The third plan aims to reduce residues and waste, reuse and recycle them, processes possible in the context of a circular economy. In support of these practices, sustainable enterprises create their own innovative technologies that facilitate the application of the 3R principles within the technological process.

4. Conclusions

Even though implementing the circular economy within enterprises seems to be very difficult, it should be mentioned here that awareness of the need for sustainable use of resources and reduction of pollution in all areas of human activity is required in order to ensure the well-being of society.

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