

SURVEY-BASED QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF YOUNG GENERATION PERCEPTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN POLAND

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the perception of Sustainable Development can help to identify misconceptions surrounding the concept in order to design better education plans and public policies on this subject. Evaluating the perception of sustainability issues by focusing on the young generation as is an important proxy to imagine what the future holds for in terms of addressing sustainable development. We conducted 177 in-person interviews on a heterogeneous group of students and random volunteers in four cities in Poland to assess their perception of Sustainable Development. The vast majority (89.3%) of the respondents were familiar with the term 'Sustainable Development'. However, part of them (57%) associated it only to the human and social development dimensions and its institutions, whereas 17.5% related it with its environmental aspects. The results supported by the literature review highlight challenges concerning the path towards a comprehensive perception of Sustainable Development and hence the achievement of the SDGs. Based on these results, we identify opportunities and incentives to bring Poland towards 2030 Agenda.

Introduction

In 1987, 'Our Common Future', also known as the Brundtland Report, defined 'Sustainable Development' (SD) as the 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987). Since then, incorporating sustainability into government policies and practices has become part of many governmental and corporate agendas, as well as civil society demands and action (Redclift, 2005; Hugé, 2013).

At the Millennium Summit, held in 2000, nations committed to a new global partnership to improve human development, established targets to be accomplished until 2015, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These inter-dependent eight goals had a list of associated quantified targets for combating extreme poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion while promoting gender equality, education, and environmental sustainability (UNDP, 2005). Although progress has been made in several areas, some of the MDGs have remained out of the way (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013; Our World in Data, 2018).

As a consequence, in 2015, the United Nations (UN), through a deliberative process, adopted a new set of targets built on the MDGs to be achieved over the next 15 years as part of a new SD agenda: The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, which encompasses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs cover 17 goals and 169 targets to be achieved by 2030, bringing together social and economic aspects of human society and their dimensions with the natural environment, by putting sustainability at the centre (Arora and Mishra, 2019). Since then, the global agenda for sustainability, endorsed by governments worldwide, has been based on SDGs (Giller et al., 2018). Besides, over the past two decades, different international organisations, such as the UN Statistics Division (UNSD), International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), UN Development Program (UNDP), World Bank, UN Environment Program (UNEP), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and International Organization for Standardization (ISO), have been working significantly for the improvement of SD statements and measuring initiatives (Wu and Wu, 2011).

There are several and non-consensual definitions of SD (Ramos, 2019). One of the main challenges is to define an SD model that not just combines environmental, social, and economic demands but also gives real meaning to the lives of individuals from different countries and nations, improving perception on the subject (Waas et al., 2011). A common thread is that most definitions seek to address complex interactions between natural and human dimensions as part of a unified system world (Batalhão et al., 2020). The solution to a perception of SD emerges from critical interdisciplinary literature, focused on the integrated development of sustainability (Sachs, 1999) and presented holistically (Disterheft et al., 2013). Sustainability is sometimes considered as a synonymous of SD. In the scientific literature, it is also referred to as the main goal of the SD (Orenstein and Shach-Pinsley, 2017).

Even after a series of historically different Sustainable Development summits, existing challenges, such as lack of involvement of multi-stakeholders, and inaccurate and inadequate assessments of results may slow implementation processes (Singh et al., 2012). For instance, the relevance of SD and sustainability is still not fully understood by society at large (Dogruyol et al., 2018). This gap lies behind the failure of initiatives to broaden the interest in the issue to a more significant number of stakeholders, users, and decision-makers (Hugé, 2013). Insufficient understanding of local citizens' perceptions of sustainability is an obstacle to assess outcomes of global environmental agendas critically (Antognelli and Vizzari, 2017).

Poland is an active member of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Raszowski and Bartniczak, 2019) Poland has also ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 1996 and assumed all its obligations under its provisions. Currently, the Program for the protection and sustainable use of biological diversity, together with the Action Plan for 2015-2020, meets these requirements. The Program is a continuation of the National Strategy for the Protection and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity and the Action Program for 2007-2013, which aims to reduce negative trends leading to the loss of biodiversity and to strengthen the sustainable management of natural resources. It is also a tool for implementing selected tasks included in the 'Strategy Energy Security and Environment - the perspective until 2020'. Both the global and the European Union (EU) strategies have become key determinants of this Program, including improving the biodiversity conservation status and a better connection of conservation, social and economic development of the country. In its pursuit to ensure sustainable economic growth, Poland has developed the National Strategy for Responsible Development (the SRD), an instrument to set priorities, directions, and actions until 2030.

These actions indicate that some political leaders and civil society are willing to lead Poland onto a more sustainable development pathway. Recent reports indicate a growing interest of Poland's society in solving historical environmental degradation issues such as air and water pollution caused by the country's high energy reliance on coal (European Commission, 2019). Poland has 72% of the most polluted cities in the EU (WHO, 2016; WHO, 2018), and researches within municipal governments have shown concern with the implications of this and other sustainability challenges, with many Polish cities and towns actively seeking solutions and identifying priority areas for intervention. Nevertheless, Poland remains the only EU country that has not committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050. Also, the country has shown problems in the protection of natural resources that are safeguarded by international directives.

Since 1992, the work of the UN Summits in conjunction with its member States has provided substantive support for intergovernmental processes in close cooperation between different layers of society. A relevant part of giving full effect to strategic decisions is perception (Craig and Allen, 2013). Perception is subjective (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) wherein sometimes our senses can be deceiving. However, when appropriately performed, research on perception can be trusted (Austin, 1962) and may be useful for decision making at higher levels. It involves preferences, responding to countries' needs, increasing their efforts to reach international agreements on SD targets (Biermann et al., 2017). Often, in international meetings, the perception of another member state can facilitate agreements and motivate the engagement of the governments of other nations (Xue et al., 2018). Many multilateral negotiations have been initiated from the subjective perception of the SD (Spangenberg, 2011).

We aimed to evaluate perception in Poland in order to support decision-makers in identifying political, economic, and cultural barriers that prevent the country from fully embracing SD. We address the perception SD in the country by focusing on a sample of college students and volunteers not yet attending university classes (mostly millennials or Gen Y) as this is a critical proxy to imagine what the future holds to Poland in terms of addressing sustainability (Hume, 2010; Fabrizzi et al., 2016) and indicate the future political and economic willingness of its upcoming leaders towards this matter. Data of the case study were collected through personal interviews, and the research approach is qualitative. We present the perception of the interviewees without generalising and extrapolating the results.

Sustainable Development perception: a brief literature review

To support the discussion, we conduct a literature review both in Polish and English, enabling the analysis of the Polish and the international contexts. In the English literature review, some studies focus on the definition of 'sustainability', like Severo et al. (2017), who analysed the perception of three generations in Brazil. Their results show that all respondents were aware of sustainability, but this awareness was not directly translated into conscious consumption behaviour. The same conclusion was also found by Hill and Lee (2012) in research with college students in the USA. A study conducted by Kagawa (2007) in the United Kingdom shows that most of the respondents related sustainability with the environmental dimension, but only performed 'light green' actions addressing responsibility as consumers (e.g. recycling) and did not pursue profound behavioural changes.

On the other hand, both a study conducted by Silva Junior et al. (2019) with management undergraduate students in Brazil, and by Kemper et al. (2018) with marketing faculty from around the world, found a tendency to prioritise the economic dimension of sustainability, even though the respondents recognised the importance of environmental conservation.

In a study performed by Balsiger and Ingold (2016) about policy decision making in Switzerland, they noted that sustainability perceptions, as well as collaboration networks, are essential for the implementation of sustainability in local climate change adaptation policies. According to this study, sustainability perceptions highly differed across cases, tending to be more balanced (assigning equal importance to environmental, economic, and social indicators) within and sometimes even across actor types and sectors. Also, adaptation policies tend to be more successful where sustainability perceptions are translated into cross-sectoral integration and collaboration on the ground.

Alternative definitions for sustainability were found by Rivero et al. (2016) in a study conducted with rural producers in Yucatan, Mexico, in which respondents understood sustainability as their capacity to maintain their traditional lifestyle and related environmental services with their sense of identity. The study shows that the lack of understanding of the discursive term or absence does not necessarily imply the non-occurrence of sustainable practices.

In the Polish review, most analysed studies considered issues concerning knowledge and awareness about sustainable agriculture and social expectations in global environmental protection goals and future challenges. The studies point out that creating a fully balanced model of life, and thus the improvement of the quality of life of people around the world without degrading natural resources, requires diverse activities in individual regions of the world. The goals and principles of SD can thus effectively and correctly create a further process of global economic and social development, provided that it is widely accepted and supported by specific actions of the state's institutional system (Janikowski, 2016; Skowroński, 2006; Jaśkiewicz, 2008). Janikowski (2016) points out that there is a favourable process of implementing the principles of SD in Poland caused by the EU's cohesion policy, which according to Matuszczak (2006) and Baum (2008), is an integral part of three key areas: economy, society, and environment.

Bołtromiuk (2010) conducted a study on the idea and principles of SD and its importance in society and economy in the years covered by the economic crisis (2008-2009). Analysis of the results concerning selected elements of ecological awareness of Polish society shows that the concept of 'sustainable development' is identified by 1/3 of respondents. At the same time, its idea is shared and recognised by over 70% of Polish society, both in the general economic and local dimensions. However, over 2/3 of respondents do not see the connection between environmental protection and economic growth (Kwiatek and Skiba, 2017).

In research on ecological awareness of young people developed by Kwiatek and Skiba (2017), they concluded that, even though respondents believe in the correlation between the presence of nature and human well-being, most of them are not willing to devote more of their income to pro-ecological solutions. Dzioban (2017), in an assessment of environmental education for SD conducted with students of Polish universities, revealed that this topic is addressed only marginally.

Janikowski (2016) indicates that respondents, especially young people, find it challenging to define SD, because this is a complex concept, and there is currently no document defining the direction of education for sustainable development in Poland. Conversely, research carried out by Kostecka and Mroczek (2007) shows that 78% of the respondent-farmers declared that they knew the definition of 'sustainable development', and 76% said they understood it.

Method of work

Data collection

We conducted 177 in-person interviews in Poland on a heterogeneous group of students and volunteers. We performed the interviews over 2018 in four voivodeships (a highest-level administrative subdivision of Poland):

- 1) Krakow (the second biggest city in Poland with 779,115 inhabitants), Malopolska voivodeship (south/south-east of Poland)
- 2) Olsztyn, capital of Warminsko-Mazurskie voivodeship (northeast of Poland)
- 3) Opole, capital of Opolskie voivodeship (south-west of Poland), and
- 4) Tarnow, a city in Malopolskie voivodeship (south-east of Poland).

Locations were chosen based on the proximity to research institutions in which the co-authors of this paperwork.

In Krakow (n = 75), students who participated in the survey were sophomore and junior undergraduates majoring in Production Management and Engineering, Agricultural and Forestry Technology, or Transport and Logistics Engineering. In Opole (n = 41), all students we interviewed were majoring in Journalism or Environmental Studies. In Olsztyn (n = 30) and Tarnow (n = 36) we interviewed students pursuing diverse careers and volunteers not yet attending university classes.

We assessed the perception of these young individuals by asking them the open-ended question 'What is sustainable development?'

Data analysis

We transcribed all recorded interviews' responses into a word processor and then translated them into English. The results were analysed in both languages. We used colour aid to find a pattern and set a structure criterion in the answers. We coded all answers manually into four categories (Flick, 2014): i) commonly used definition of sustainable development (WCED, 1987), which means development that takes into account social, economic, and ecological aspects pointing to intergenerational justice; ii) responses that emphasised the environmental dimension (e.g. need for protection and respect for nature); iii) responses that include at least one dimension related to collective or individual human development (economic, technological, health, etc.); iv) responses such as 'I don't know' or other expressions of non-understanding.

Results and Discussion

Respondents background

Figure 1 presents participants' background. Most of the respondents were university students, with complete secondary education (92%), and residents of cities > 100 000 habitants (55,4%). Regarding gender, 50,8% men and 49,2% women responded to the survey.

Declared perception of Sustainable Development

The vast majority (89.3%, n = 158) of the respondents were somehow familiar with the term 'sustainable development' which corresponds to categories 1, 2, and 3. The same is not found in studies by Bołtomiuk (2010) in which 1/3 of the research participants declares understanding the term. Likewise, a study from Janikowski (2016) concluded that the definition of SD is difficult to understand by respondents, especially for young people. Interestingly, the majority of respondent-farmers in the survey conducted Kostecka and Mroczek (2007) said they knew the definition of SD.

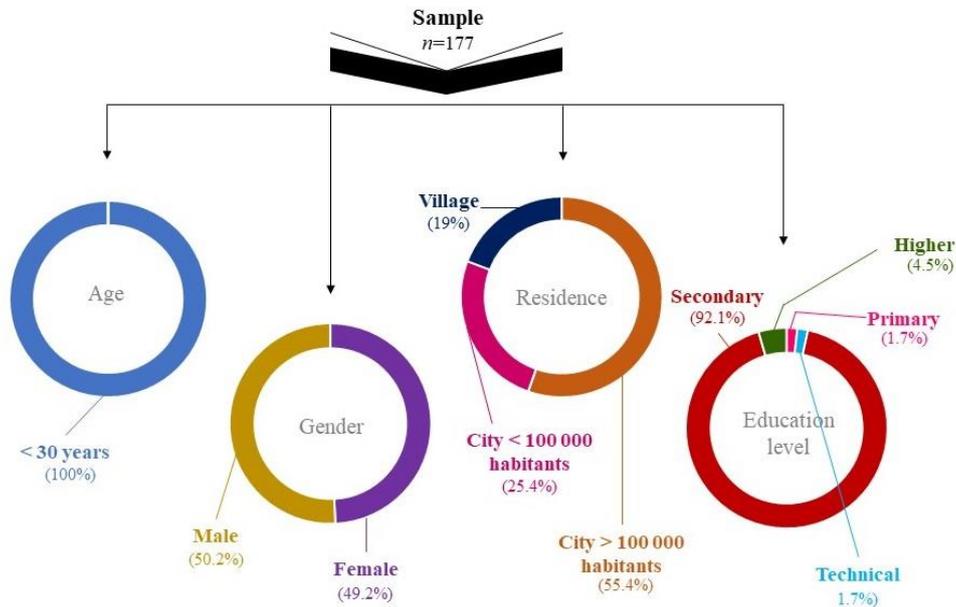


Figure 1. Respondents background

Most of the respondents (57.1%, $n = 101$) indicated that SD includes at least one dimension commonly related to human and social development and its institutions (such as industry, technology, and business). A significant number of individuals that associate SD with its environmental aspect (17.5%). This perception includes concerns about the exploitation of renewable resources, sustainable management of natural resources, sustainable agriculture and industry, and the relationship between human development and nature. However, we should note that part of our responders was pursuing a degree in environmental studies, which might have influenced their answers. In the review, we found that some authors also identified trends in their research of generalisation and simplification of the idea of SD and sustainability to one of its dimensions (environmental, social, and economic). Kagawa (2007) observed that most participants connect with the ecological dimension while Silva Junior et al. (Silva Junior et al., 2019) and Kemper et al. (2018) noted the tendency to relate the term to the economic dimension. Two interesting points can be raised from these findings: The first is the problem with the oversimplification and generalisation of the term ‘Sustainable Development’. According to Colantonio (2009), the generalisation of SD and the different definitions according to discipline-specific criteria make sustainability (social, which is the scope of the author’s research) more challenging to be achieved. There is a great danger of generalisation and simplification, which is the concealment of interests, intentions, and actions that are actually unsustainable and diverge from the SDGs. Rivero et al. (2016) show that, fortunately, a lack or absence of understanding of the discursive term does not necessarily imply the non-occurrence of sustainable practices.

Thus, we are aligned with Janikowski (2016) who highlights the complexity of the idea and concept of SD. Corroborating, the category with the least frequency (14.7%, $n = 26$) was category 1, which consists of a complex and complete definition in terms of the scope of dimensions.

Limitations

In this study, we have looked more closely at people's perceptions (their own conceptualisations) of SD, which required a focus on qualitative approaches. The method used allowed us to capture respondents' declared perception, fraught with subjectivity, but not necessarily representing objective knowledge. Also, we do not intend to reduce the perception of young Polish citizens through this study, and we do not argue that the results are generalisable.

Another limitation of this study was the management of the data collection by the research team, since the availability of data depended directly on the respondents during the period of application of the survey, as argued by Aaker et al. (2012). The findings were not analysed with descriptive statistics given the limited number of responses, as cited by Saunders et al. (2012).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this article, we analyse qualitatively the perception of sustainable development based on the response of young Poles, mostly college students. We found convergences with studies on the same topic conducted in Poland and other countries. The vast majority of the respondents were somehow familiar with the term 'sustainable development', even though some misconceptions and oversimplifications of the term were found. Although this might seem positive for the achievement of the SDGs, knowledge is not necessarily translated into action (Severo et al., 2007, Kagawa, 2007; Silva Junior et al., 2019). Also, our study reinforces the great danger in the generalisation and simplification of the term, which could lead to the concealment of interests, intentions, and actions that can actually be unsustainable and diverge from the SDGs. SD has received a lot of attention and support from politicians and broader society representing different lifestyles, regardless of religion, culture, citizenship and political perspective. Its understanding is, therefore, complex (Janikowski, 2016), which makes consistent actions a challenge (Singh et al., 2012).

We propose further research with young people from other locations at similar levels; research in different cities and analysis level, which can complement our results; correlation studies between the responses and the different study fields of college students; and also studies conducted in Poland with respondents with different backgrounds.

We also recommend the following opportunities for incentives to bring Poland towards the 2030 Agenda:

1. Increase capacity building by a joint effort among the Ministry of Climate, Agriculture, and Education and universities and research centers to promote knowledge exchange regarding SD.
2. Promote educational materials that would introduce the reader to the topic and explain the main assumptions of sustainable development in an accessible way. Such brochures could be distributed in schools and linked to environmental-awareness programs and activities, being discussed during classes. For example, the Faculty of Political Science and

the Public Communication University of Opole is preparing a course about SD in every teaching program (political science, international relations, international security, public management, and even journalism studies and public relations).

3. Encourage agricultural entrepreneurs to be involved in social campaigns in rural areas, organising events, for example, around the parishes, where social life often revolves around in the countryside.
4. Cooperate with local governments in the countryside and smaller cities to promote the publication of articles on SD in the local press and magazines, written in an accessible language.

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ANALIZA OPARTA NA BADANIACH POSTRZEGANIA PRZEZ MŁODE POKOLENIE ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO ROZWOJU W POLSCE

Streszczenie. Zrozumienie postrzegania zrównoważonego rozwoju może pomóc w zidentyfikowaniu błędnych przekonań dotyczących tej koncepcji w celu opracowania lepszych planów edukacyjnych i polityk publicznych w tym zakresie. Ocena postrzegania kwestii zrównoważonego rozwoju poprzez skupienie się na młodym pokoleniu, jako ważny wskaźnik pozwalający wyobrazić sobie, co przyniesie przyszłość w zakresie rozwiązywania kwestii zrównoważonego rozwoju. Przeprowadziliśmy 177 wywiadów osobistych na niejednorodnej grupie studentów i przypadkowych wolontariuszy w czterech miastach w Polsce, aby ocenić ich postrzeganie zrównoważonego rozwoju. Zdecydowana większość (89,3%) respondentów zna termin „zrównoważony rozwój”. Jednak część z nich (57%) kojarzyła go tylko z wymiarem rozwoju ludzkiego i społecznego oraz jego instytucji, a 17,5% z aspektami środowiskowymi. Wyniki poparte przeglądem literatury podkreślają wyzwania dotyczące ścieżki do wszechstronnego postrzegania zrównoważonego rozwoju, a tym samym osiągnięcia celów zrównoważonego rozwoju. Na podstawie tych wyników identyfikujemy szanse i zachęty do zbliżenia Polski do Agendy 2030.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój; postrzeganie zrównoważonego rozwoju; wymiary zrównoważonego rozwoju, polityki publiczne