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OBSTACLES AND POSITIVE TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN POLAND

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BARIERY I POZYTYWNE TENDENCJE W ROZWOJU ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ KONSUMPCJI W POLSCE

STRESZCZENIE: W artykule zaprezentowano zarówno bariery, jak i możliwości implementacji koncepcji zrównoważonej konsumpcji w Polsce. Na wstępie zdefiniowano koncepcję zrównoważonej konsumpcji. Zrównoważona konsumpcja została przedstawiona jako ważny cel spośród 17 Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju na lata 2016–2030. Następnie przeanalizowano bariery oraz zaprezentowano pozytywne tendencje w rozwoju zrównoważonej konsumpcji w Polsce. Umożliwiło to opracowanie zestawienia, które może pomóc w opracowaniu strategii zrównoważonej konsumpcji w Polsce. W artykule wykorzystano metodę analizy krytycznej literatury.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: zrównoważona konsumpcja, możliwości i zagrożenia implementacji zrównoważonej konsumpcji w Polsce

Introduction

Sustainable consumption is one of the main goals of sustainable development. It is also strongly associated with creating better quality of life as an overarching objective of the new development paradigm¹. Sustainable consumption and production are often treated as the core of the sustainable development goal and a cross-cutting issue to be embedded within other goals². Some researchers noted that the sustainable consumption and production goal is the priority in terms of links with the implementation of other sustainable development goals³. That is why it is so important, in the opinion of the author of this article, to deal with sustainable consumption and to link it with relevant sectoral policies, such as tourism, transport, agriculture, energy, and construction⁴. At the beginning, however, a specific analysis should be carried out to see how this concept is implemented in Poland. The aim of this article is to identify barriers and present positive trends in the development of sustainable consumption in Poland.

Sustainable consumption – main definitions

The official definition of sustainable consumption was proposed quite a long time ago, in 1994, during the Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption. According to this definition sustainable consumption is “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations”⁵.

¹ T. Borys, *Wybrane problemy metodologii pomiaru nowego paradygmatu rozwoju – polskie doświadczenia*, “Optimum. Studia Ekonomiczne” 2014 No. 3(69), pp. 9–11.

² L. Akenji, M. Bengtsson, *Making Sustainable Consumption and Production the Core of the Sustainable Development Goals*, Kanagawa 2014, p. 4.

³ D. Le Blanc, *Towards integration at last? The Sustainable Development Goals as a network of targets*, Rio +20 working papers, December 2014, pp. 3–16, www.sustainabledevelopment.un.org [23/02/2015].

⁴ T. Borys, op. cit., p. 11.

⁵ www.iisd.ca [21/10/2015].

In practice, strong and weak sustainable consumption are identified⁶. Weak sustainable consumption is achieved through the eco-efficiency of appliances and technological improvements. As noted by S. Lorek, this approach has dominated political and scientific thinking, in particular after the Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002, and is expressed in the concept of sustainable consumption and production (SCP). SCP is focused on products, services and consumer responsibility for buying 'green', sustainable products. On the other hand, strong sustainable consumption approaches additionally indicate the need for significant changes in the levels and patterns of consumption. They emphasize the need for an overall reduction in resource consumption. Quality of life, wellbeing and non-economic human activity are important elements of strong sustainable consumption⁷.

According to the author of this article, the overarching goal of sustainable consumption is the lasting improvement of quality of life (which corresponds with the concept of strong sustainable consumption) in the aspects of 'to have', 'to be' and 'to love'. Sustainable consumption is a conscious consumption based on consumers' responsibility and high awareness of their needs, which is reflected in making informed and responsible consumer decisions. Sustainable consumption is the use of alternative energy-saving appliances made of renewable materials, which is the 'technological' way to solve problems. Sustainable consumption means 'consuming less' but also 'consuming differently'. Consuming less means, for example, limiting travel by car, while consuming differently means that people follow the principles of ecodriving.

The United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development held in New York on 25–27 September 2015 established the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2016–2030⁸. One of them is Goal 12, to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns⁹. Goal 12 will be implemented through 11 targets, such as the efficient use of natural resources, reduction of food losses, prevention of waste generation, corporate social responsibility (CSR), green public procurement (GPP), support for developing countries to strengthen their technological capacity, sustainable tourism, phasing out inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies, and shaping social awareness for sustainable lifestyles. As one can see, the above targets do not contain provisions stating explicitly the

⁶ S. Lorek, D. Fuchs, *Strong sustainable consumption governance – precondition for a degrowth path?*, „Journal of Cleaner Production” 2013 No. 38, p. 36.

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 37–38.

⁸ These goals were criticized by Angus Deaton, a winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Economic Science. “I am not a great fan, there is no way to measure them. A lot of it is just people trying to make themselves feel better”, Deaton said. [*Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton shares 3 big ideas*, “Financial Times”, www.ft.com [13/10/2015].

⁹ www.sustainabledevelopment.un.org [13/10/2015].

reduction of excessive consumption. This fact is not surprising, because freedom of consumption is one of the two basic aspects of human economic freedom, and people can decide how they spend their income. It can be assumed that the UN provisions indirectly express the essence of sustainable consumption without limiting the free choices of individuals – the aim of the eighth target is only to ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature.

Barriers to the implementation of sustainable consumption in Poland

In Poland there are a number of serious barriers to the implementation of sustainable consumption. The most important ones are listed below:

1. First barrier: **lack of precise definitions**

An important problem, and not only in Poland, is the lack of precise definitions for sustainable and unsustainable consumption.

Problems with the operationalization of sustainable consumption result from difficulties with the precise definition of the categories of quality of life, because the sustainable quality of life encompasses, for example, the quality of 'having', the quality of 'being' and the quality of 'loving'¹⁰. These difficulties also arise from linking environmental wellbeing with human and economic wellbeing (improved quality of life). This is confirmed in the recent scores for the Sustainable Society Index (SSI) for 2014¹¹. The SSI offers a picture of the level of sustainability of countries worldwide¹². It measures the level of sustainability in three dimensions: human wellbeing, environmental wellbeing and economic wellbeing. A disturbing finding from the analysis of the SSI is the strong negative correlation between environmental and human wellbeing: increased human wellbeing usually means lower environmental wellbeing. The same can be seen for economic wellbeing – higher income is related to higher economic wellbeing but lower environmental wellbeing. This negative correlation, according to the authors of the SSI report, should be of major concern. Therefore, starting from 2014, reports do not present an overall SSI score for a sustainable society, and the level of sustainability in individual

¹⁰ B. Kryk, *Zrównoważona jakość życia a zrównoważona konsumpcja i zachowania ekologiczne polskich konsumentów*, „Handel Wewnętrzny” 2013 No. 6, pp. 5–18.

¹¹ www.ssindex.com [21/10/2015].

¹² B. Kryk, *Jakość życia w kontekście zrównoważonego rozwoju*, „Handel Wewnętrzny” 2012, July-August, Vol. 1, pp. 145–155.

countries is shown in particular dimensions of wellbeing. Currently, the SSI team is developing a new tool that can be used to identify countries at the highest level of sustainability¹³.

In light of the above-mentioned findings one can wonder whether the definition of sustainable development is still valid, and whether we can still talk about the harmonised implementation of the three goals of sustainable development. It should be noted that the countries with the best scores of consumption (i.e. those where consumption in global hectares per person is below 0.7) are also in distant positions when it comes to other dimensions of wellbeing – human and economic. These countries are: Bangladesh, Haiti, Iraq, North Korea, India, Pakistan, Yemen, Congo, Mozambique, and Tajikistan¹⁴.

2. Second barrier: **unsustainable practices in transport**

In Poland in 2014 there were 519.9 passenger cars per 1,000 people¹⁵. Before 2000 this figure was about two-fold lower. The average age of a car in Poland at the end of the reporting year was 15.5 years. In this respect Poland is very different from the EU average, which was 8.2. This situation is due to the presence of old cars, which after 2004 could be brought to Poland without any problems. Between May 2004 and the end of 2011 Poles imported almost 7 million pre-owned cars, and more than half of them were at that time older than 10 years. The technical condition of cars sold is often unsatisfactory: 74% of them had been involved in a road accident, and in 66% of cases the condition of the car declared in the advertisement did not correspond with the actual condition. Almost 80% of cars offered for sale are imported, of which the most by far are from Germany¹⁶. The current situation would perhaps be different if appropriate administrative and legal measures restricting the private importation of cars were introduced at the right moment. Today it can be assumed that further improvement in the economic status of Poles will result in the withdrawal of obsolete, inefficient cars from use.

The Transport Development Strategy predicts a number of adverse changes in the transport sector in Poland by 2020, including: further increase in the use of private cars, a significant increase in air transport, a decline in the use of urban public transport, a progressive decline in foot traffic in cities, only slightly offset by increased bicycle traffic. Some optimistic data relate

¹³ A. Manuel, G. van de Kerk, R. Kleinjans, *Sustainable Society Index 2014*, Hague 2014, pp. 23–24, www.ssfindex.com [21/10/2015].

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

¹⁵ Sustainable development indices. www.stat.gov.pl [20/10/2015].

¹⁶ www.pieniadze.gazeta.pl [5/02/2015].

only to the potential growth in passenger transport by rail, provided, however, the quality of services is improved and a high-standard rail system is put into operation¹⁷.

3. Third barrier: **the lack of a stable governmental vision for institutional support in the implementation of sustainable consumption**

In Poland, a major problem is the lack of a stable governmental vision as to institutional support in the implementation of sustainable consumption. This is reflected, for example, in the very general nature of the only document addressing this issue, namely *The strategy for changing production and consumption patterns to favour the implementation of the principles of sustainable development*, adopted in 2003¹⁸, as well as the lack of further updates. In addition, the Working Group for sustainable consumption and production established at the Ministry of the Economy is focused mainly on the problems of corporate social responsibility (CSR)¹⁹.

4. Fourth barrier: **insufficient understanding of the core of sustainable consumption by society**²⁰

The subjective perception of consumption by respondents varies widely and is strongly correlated with factors such as place of residence (consumers from the largest cities perceive their consumption as fairly sustainable), education (better educated respondents perceive their own consumption as sustainable) and financial status (respondents with higher incomes see their own consumption as more sustainable).

However, the survey revealed that the subjective opinions of respondents are not consistent with their behaviour; in some areas it is villagers who more often believe that their consumption is unsustainable but show more sustainable behaviour; a similar situation concerns people with higher and secondary education who, given their declared high level of sustainable consumption, in fact, do not show more sustainable behaviour; therefore, the

¹⁷ Strategia Rozwoju Transportu do 2020 roku (z perspektywą do 2030 roku)/Transport Development Strategy by 2020 (with a prospect until 2030), Ministry of Transport, Construction and Maritime Economy, Warsaw 22 January 2013, www.mir.gov.pl [20/10/2015].

¹⁸ Strategia zmian wzorców produkcji i konsumpcji na sprzyjające realizacji zasad trwałego, zrównoważonego rozwoju/ A government document adopted by the Council of Ministers on 14 October 2003, www.mg.gov.pl [21/08/2015].

¹⁹ www.mg.gov.pl [21/10/2015].

²⁰ B. Jaros, A questionnaire-based survey on consumption conducted in August and September 2014 on a representative sample of 500 adult residents of the Silesian province aged 19 years and older (part of the doctoral thesis, unpublished work). Due to the regional nature of the survey, there is limited ability to extrapolate the results to the entire population of Poland.

author of this article believes that such a distribution of answers may stem from a lack of knowledge about sustainable consumption.

The surveyed respondents showed ambivalent attitudes towards the principles of sustainable consumption. For example, respondents on one hand declare that they save energy, and on the other hand they usually leave electronic appliances in standby mode; on one hand they separate waste motivated by the desire to protect the environment, but on the other hand do not pay much attention to the separate collection of pharmaceuticals.

Sustainable consumption is not fully understood, which is proven by the fact that most respondents indicate financial costs as the main obstacle to implement sustainable consumption ('it is too expensive'); in turn, for those with the highest income the major obstacle to sustainable consumption is the lack of time ('it requires a lot of time').

5. Fifth barrier: **the occurrence of a negative rebound effect**

The rebound effect is the range of the energy savings produced by investments in energy-efficient appliances, which will be taken over by consumers in the form of increased consumption as the greater number of hours for which these appliances will work. The rebound effect is calculated by subtracting the actual savings made by the use of energy-saving appliances from the potential savings that could be gained through the use of the same good. In this way the savings from energy efficient appliances are offset by the demographic and social factors and human behaviour²¹.

The existence of the rebound effect is confirmed by statistics on the use of electricity in Poland. In 2004–2010 the consumption of energy per year per capita grew steadily from 597.3 kWh to 773.0 kWh, and in the following years (2011–2013) began to decrease slightly to reach 758.8 kWh²².

Another example of the rebound effect is the decreasing household size – the smaller the household, the higher the consumption of natural resources per capita; the higher number of households also means that larger areas designated for development, new residential buildings are constructed and more construction materials are used. The increase in the number of households increases the demand for household appliances such as refrigerators, freezers, cookers, washing machines and television sets. More furniture and cars are being sold as well. In addition, all these appliances generate indirect energy consumption for households related to the demand for energy during the production and distribution of these goods. In Poland

²¹ H. Throne-Holst, P. Strandbakken, *From theory to practice – Towards an efficiency of consumption*, in: E. Hertwich, T. Briceno, P. Hofstetter, A. Inaba (eds.), *Sustainable Consumption: The Contribution of Research*, Trondheim 2005, pp. 39–47.

²² www.stat.gov.pl, op. cit.

between 2000 and 2013 the number of households formed by single people increased significantly from 10.6 to 21.7 per cent.²³

6. Sixth barrier: **behaviours in the consumer society**

Clear signs of consumerism can be observed among Polish consumers, and this behaviour is becoming more and more popular²⁴. Consumerism is an ideology that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts, without considering the environmental, social and personal costs²⁵. Consumerism is manifested in overconsumption, which is the use of short-lasting and cheap products on the principle that it is better to have more than less, but to the detriment of the quality of the purchased goods. According to O. Leszczak: "the problem is not that people become stuff collectors and attach too much importance to physical objects and material goods, but that they do not attach any importance to them"²⁶.

The majority of surveyed consumers like shopping and do it frequently²⁷. This is also reflected in the high propensity of respondents to visit retail outlets. Only a small fraction of respondents claim to be happy when their basic needs are satisfied. The most important reasons driving purchasing decisions are: striving to meet needs at a sufficient level, the desire to be like others, and the desire to stand out. Consumers consider a luxury car, fashionable brand clothing and holidays at an exotic destination as the best signs of high status. For almost half of consumers fashion is a fundamental driver of their purchasing decisions. Almost half of the respondents buy products to stock up, which undoubtedly promotes the wastage of resources.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ E. Kieźel, *Konsumpcjonizm i dekonsumpcja w zachowaniach polskich konsumentów*, in: E. Kieźel, S. Smyczek (eds.), *Zachowania konsumentów. Procesy unowocześniania konsumpcji*, Warszawa 2014, p. 95.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 80.

²⁶ O. Leszczak, *Paradoksy konsumpcjonizmu. Typologia i lingwosemiotyka*, in: R. Stefański (ed.), *Życie w konsumpcji – konsumpcja w życiu – konsumpcja życia: współczesny człowiek w społeczeństwie konsumpcyjnym*, "The Peculiarity of Man" 2012 No. 15, p. 33.

²⁷ E. Kieźel, op. cit., pp. 83–90; results of this survey cannot also be extrapolated to the entire population of consumers in Poland, since the survey was carried out on a group of 258 respondents from the Silesian province.

Positive trends in the implementation of sustainable consumption in Poland

Barriers to the implementation of sustainable consumption in Poland are significantly offset by positive trends, for example:

1. **Growing interest in the issues of sustainable consumption**

The new paradigms of development and consumption are rapidly developing areas of research in Poland and worldwide; a new scientific discipline – sustainable development economics – is emerging, as well as various forms of environmental education (including those promoting sustainable consumption). The issues of sustainable consumption and production have been highlighted as a separate goal in the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In Poland the Working Group for Sustainable Consumption and Production has been established at the Ministry of the Economy. In 2015 the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences was awarded to Angus Deaton for his analysis of consumption, poverty and welfare. The justification for this decision reads that understanding how consumers distribute their spending among different goods is necessary for explaining and forecasting actual consumption patterns.

2. **Development of theoretical foundations for sustainable consumption**

To some extent the theoretical foundations of sustainable consumption are well-established, and agreement has been reached on the nature and scope of instruments supporting sustainable consumption, consumption areas and products that have the most negative impact on the environment, and indicators of sustainable consumption and production.

3. **Promotion of environmentally-friendly behaviours**

There are social campaigns promoting environmentally-friendly consumer behaviours, such as those organised by the Ministry of the Environment „Wyłączamy prąd. Włączamy oszczędzanie” (Turn off electricity. Turn on saving), „Nie zaśmiecaj swojego sumienia” (Clear trash. Keep your conscience clean.), „Zielone miasta – w stronę przyszłości” (Green cities – heading towards the future), or an informational campaign on raising public awareness of biodiversity and actions in support of ecosystems²⁸.

²⁸ www.mos.gov.pl [26/10/2015].

4. Development of the *sharing economy*

The popularity of the *sharing economy* in Poland is growing steadily. This term is broad and encompasses a number of slightly different ideas, such as²⁹:

Collaborative economy is an economic system of decentralized networks and marketplaces that unlocks the value of underused assets by matching needs and haves in ways that bypass traditional middlemen (examples from Poland: Banki Czasu (Time Banking) is a pattern of reciprocal service exchange, e.g. a one-hour guitar lesson is exchanged for a one-hour English lesson, and a unit of time is used as a currency);

Sharing economy is an economic system based on sharing underused assets or services, for free or for a fee, directly from individuals (examples from Poland: Airbnb – rental/letting of beds in private homes, BlaBlaCar is a service matching drivers who offer vacant seats with people seeking transport);

Collaborative consumption is the reinvention of traditional market behaviours – renting, lending, swapping, sharing, bartering, gifting – through modern technologies – the Internet, mobile apps (examples from Poland: Allegro, eBay – websites operating online auctions, Zipcar – car rental by the hour so users only pay for the actual use of the car (for now the service is unavailable in Poland, but it may be launched soon);

On-demand services – platforms that directly match customer needs with providers to immediately deliver goods and services (for example Uber – ordering car transport services by matching passengers with drivers that use the Uber mobile application, DeskBeers – in the UK the platform provides beer from small artisan breweries, Alfred – in the United States, helps find people who will do your household chores).

5. Instruments supporting sustainable consumption

Positive environmental effects have been observed as a result of the use of instruments supporting sustainable consumption. The most important of these are eco-labelling, charging customers for disposable shopping bags, changes in the municipal waste management system, and the popularisation of energy-saving fluorescent lamps.

6. Developing monitoring of sustainable consumption

The scope of monitoring in the area of sustainable development and consumption has been extended; in 2011 the Central Statistical Office (GUS)

²⁹ R. Botsman, *Defining The Sharing Economy: What is Collaborative Consumption – And What Isn't?*, www.fastcoexist.com [20/10/2015].

published a report on sustainable development indicators for Poland (*Wskaźniki zrównoważonego rozwoju Polski*)³⁰; GUS also launched a special module in BDL (Bank Danych Lokalnych/Local Data Bank), „Wskaźniki zrównoważonego rozwoju”/Sustainable development indicators, which presents statistics on sustainable consumption and production”.

Summary

It is difficult to clearly determine the trends prevailing in Poland. It should be kept in mind that Poland still has to catch up with richer countries of Western Europe in terms of economic growth, so we can expect that consumption in Poland will grow as the standard of living increases. In such a situation instruments supporting sustainable consumption should be used so that consumers can make the most sustainable choices. There are quite a few options for action in this field. For example, new energy-efficient technologies can be promoted, awareness of the effects of overconsumption can be raised, people can be educated to appreciate the aspect of quality of goods and services and understand the importance of components of quality of life other than ‘to have’. Consumers can also be educated in the area of sustainable consumption and economic knowledge, or smart *nudging* solutions can be used³¹.

In June 2016 a conference organised by SCORAI (Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative)³² focused on the issue of *Transitions Beyond a Consumer Society*. This topic indicates the most urgent problem to solve in the area of sustainable consumption – how to develop a strategy for transition from a consumer society to a sustainable society, whose economy and culture are not primarily based on mass consumption.

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³⁰ *Wskaźniki zrównoważonego rozwoju Polski*, Katowice 2011.

³¹ When *nudging* one arranges the choice situation in a way that makes a desirable outcome the easiest or the most attractive option. Nudging is currently one of the most promising tools for sustainable behaviour; see R. Thaler, C. Sunstein, *Impuls. Jak podejmować właściwe decyzje dotyczące zdrowia, dobrobytu i szczęścia*, Poznań 2008; O. Mont, M. Lehner, E. Heiskanen, *Nudging. A tool for sustainable behavior?* Swedish Environmental Protection Agency Report 6643, December 2014, www.swedishepa.se [26/10/2015].

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