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*ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS OF THE SOCIETY AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT*

**ŚWIADOMOŚĆ EKOLOGICZNA SPOŁECZEŃSTWA A ROZWÓJ
ZRÓWNOWAŻONY**

Key words: ecological awareness, sustainable development, typology of awareness, Integrated Product Policy, environmental management

Słowa kluczowe: świadomość ekologiczna, zrównoważony rozwój, typologia świadomości, zintegrowana polityka produktowa, zarządzanie środowiskowe

Abstract. The ecological awareness of the society is an indispensable social factor contributing to sustainable development. This paper presents the typology of ecological awareness according to basic types of cognition and the state of ecological awareness of Polish society as diagnosed in the research study carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) ordered by the Institute for sustainable development. Furthermore this paper explores how the ecological awareness of the society becomes an instrument of social support and along with the economic instruments contributes to the sustainable economic development based on knowledge and what is the role of environmental management system within the framework of Integrated Product Policy (IPP) in this process. Finally the paper discusses study findings illustrating the state of the ecological awareness of Polish entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Polish literature on sustainable development uses various terms to translate it into Polish („zrównoważony rozwój”, „trwały rozwój”, „ekorozwój”, „ład zintegrowany”). It results from the fact that the concept itself is understood differently by the economists, ecologists or sociologists. However, despite the differences, the debate on sustainable development refers to a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but in the indefinite future [United Nations Conference1992, www.mos.gov.pl]. It refers to socio-economic development as a process integrating economic development, social development, and environmental protection in order to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The implementation of the sustainable development principles is determined by the state of ecological awareness of the society. Simultaneously the knowledge on this subject plays a major role in state ecology policy programming and the selection of implementation instruments. For that reason it is important to carry out research to diagnose the ecological awareness of the society and local communities as it contributes to the development of the state and regions in harmony with the environment and helps implement projects and new technologies in compliance with environmental requirements.

The ecological awareness of the society: definitions

Social consciousness is a set of various aspects of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes and behavioural patterns which co-exist constituting a more or less coherent entirety. Social awareness does not exist without knowledge, without it no other constituent parts can be discussed. A similar definition can be applied to define ecological awareness which comprises all internalised ideas, values and opinions about the environment as the place of human (social) life and development shared by defined groups in a particular historical period [Górka, Poskrobko, Radecki 2001]. In a narrower sense it is defined as the state of knowledge, opinions and beliefs people share about the role of the environment in human life, the degree of exploitation, hazard and protection including the state of knowledge about measures and instruments of environmental management.

In reference to the basic types of cognition criterion the following types of ecological awareness can be distinguished:

- Colloquial awareness. It is common sense awareness. It divides into dispersed and integrated awareness. The former is the awareness of individuals and comprises many fragmentary opinions, attitudes, stereotypical beliefs on the natural environment which do not constitute a coherent entirety and are not durable but remain sensitive to mood and opinion changes. The latter is an awareness of social groups. It comprises opinions, attitudes and beliefs concerning natural environment which constitute a more or less coherent entirety and have their source in tradition and cultural heritage,
- Ideological awareness. It divides into ideological and religious awareness. Ideological awareness is based on the conviction about the rightness of certain values and objectives and the acts aiming at their realization. Mostly they are programmes of political parties and ecological movements. They share one important assumption that environmental protection prevails over other social objectives. The religious awareness derives from the principles of faith and is a form of social awareness comprising a set of beliefs and religious acts. Religion teaches about the basic relations between a man and nature and in the consciousness of believers and non-believers this teaching builds or compensates the ecological awareness,
- Scientific awareness. It is based on scientific knowledge about ecology deriving from scientific research findings and other sources. Few social circles share this type of awareness but its importance is increasing through ecological education, pro-ecological activity of individuals and social groups [Górka, Poskrobko, Radecki 2001].

Knowledge of the aforementioned types of ecological awareness facilitates the description of the process of shaping the ecological awareness of the society which usually comprises three phases: the period of colloquial awareness, the period of emerging elements of ideological awareness and the period of common scientific ecological awareness forming a relatively coherent system. The phases occur successively along time line. However before the society internalises the pro-ecological behavioural forms, first, it must perceive such phenomenon as environmental degradation and confront its consequences, recognise the value of non-degraded nature, show interest in environmental protection issues and finally develop social pro-ecological pressure.

The typology of awareness presented above does not fully explain the essence of the term „ecological awareness”. To get to the core it would be necessary to quote definitions deriving from research methodologies of this subject used by various disciplines. The philosophers and the economists perceive ecological awareness as a part of social consciousness. The social psychologists declare that ecological awareness is a part of social consciousness but in their research practice they rather refer to various cognitive situations and states of mind. Despite these disparities it is possible to conclude that social psychologists perceive ecological awareness as a part of individual consciousness. On the other hand the sociologists declare that it is possible to refer to ecological awareness both as a part of individual and social consciousness. It is similar to the stance of pedagogy where the term ecological awareness is defined as an area in social consciousness referring to human natural environment. The individual awareness is a result of the life time process of socialisation. Despite various explanations and interpretations it is important to notice that the sense of the category of ecological awareness derives from the fear of natural foundation of life, the ecological crisis, the threat of global ecological catastrophe, the activity of ecological movements and organisations, international policy for environmental protection. The multitude of interpretations of the term ecological awareness is reflected in theoretical models of ecological awareness, namely ethical (philosophical) and sociological [Papuziński 2005].

The philosophical concept of ecological awareness is based on the notions of values and ecological norms. The ecological values comprise: life, health, responsibility for one's deeds, moderation in exploitation of nature, the awareness of common world of humankind and nature. In this model the ecological awareness is not existing but becoming. Therefore the ecological awareness is a desired state of social consciousness development, in which the high level of knowledge about eco-systems is accompanied by the ability to perceive and forecast ecological consequences of one's own activity and moral sensitivity to relations between a man and nature in individual and social dimension. The axis of ecological awareness is ecological conscience where a man reaches the sense of responsibility for life in all manifestations.

The sociological approach to ecological awareness treats it as a descriptive category. It is a part of social consciousness covering information and convictions concerning natural environment and perception of relations between the state of the environment and human living conditions, especially in the presence of ecological hazards. The scientists are particularly interested in such issues as: the interest of social groups in environmental protection, the sense of danger related to ecological crisis, acceptance of environmental degradation as the price of economic development etc.

Nowadays the debate on ecological awareness has also involved political science [Papuziński 2005]. However political scientists have not developed a political theory of ecological awareness and only a postulated model can be discussed at the moment. The political concept of ecological awareness involves creating procedures of attaining goals in the area of environment protection in the process of taking economic and social decisions. Postulated political notion of ecological awareness also comprises the set of beliefs concerning mutual relations between the favourable socio-economic development and preservation of natural environment. In this approach ecological awareness plays two major roles: stimulates the process of community integration and obliges social entities to respect these relations when taking decisions. The political model represents a structural approach: awareness as a whole is more than the sum of its components as there are system connections between them. In consequence ecological awareness cannot be thematically singled out part of consciousness. The whole social consciousness should have an ecological character.

The ecological awareness of Polish society – selection of research findings

The analysis of the research findings on the ecological awareness of Polish society owes a lot to the studies by Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) carried out in 1992, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004 and 2008 on a nationwide sample of 1100 people and ordered by the Institute for Eco-development. The studies have the advantage of being comparable thanks to the construction of the questionnaire in which 90% of the questions constituted an invariable module. This methodology of research showed the dynamics of changes and made it possible to identify stages in the process of evolution of the ecological awareness of Polish society. The first studies revealed fear and conviction about the deterioration of the environment in Poland as well as widespread interest in ecological issues and acceptance for activities aiming at eliminating ecological hazard and improvement of the environment. In successive years the sense of danger diminished and the interest in ecology remained on the same level. However the social threats such as the loss of a job prevailed over ecological questions. There was an increase in the number of positive ecological evaluations of the place of living – up to 68% in 2008. Simultaneously the respondents expressed opinion that Polish society is rather unprepared for new threats such as the import of hazardous waste or genetically modified organisms (GMO). The respondents ranked the practical and useful values of the environment higher than the natural values e.g. the quality of drinkable water prevailed over the existence of rare species of animals. An interesting disparity between the pro-ecological declarations and real life choices was observed. The respondents declared an urgent need to preserve valuable natural habitats and at the same time were upset because of the ban of cars from wildlife reserve. It is also typical for Polish society not to trust information about negative consequences of ecological hazards. Also at least half of the respondents admit that they do not adhere to the regulations concerning environmental protection.

The main components of ecological awareness are ecological attitudes. Burger [2000, 2005] introduced the following categories of attitudes: pro-ecological, ecologically indifferent, and the group of opponents of environment protection represented by 10% of the respondents. The first attitude is characteristic for people who definitely support the idea of environment protection. The people who are ecologically indifferent can be divided into three groups:

- Group of people who support environment protection but does not demonstrate clear pro-ecological attitude,
- Group of people who are indifferent to environmental issues and do not see the necessity to protect the environment,
- Group of people who are able to notice the problems of the environment but believe the time to tackle them has not come yet.

The size of pro-ecological group has been diminishing over recent years: 1992 – 34%; 1993 –

31%; 1997 – 32%; 2000 – 22%, 2004 – 16%, 2008 – 11%. The authors of the studies conclude that this phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that the percentage of respondents perceiving the pollution of the environment as one of the most important civilisation hazards is growing smaller. They also put emphasis on the fact that social hazards prevail over ecological hazards and the ecological awareness of Polish society has only reached the phase when the system of values, assessments and behavioural norms are being formed.

The attitudes towards the environment can be easily traced in consumers' behavioural patterns, in the area of communication, waste management and the problems of protected areas. Consumers' behaviour is dominated by health and economic motives. People are more prepared to undertake pro-ecological actions if they translate into the improvement of their health or the health of their family and they draw tangible benefits by saving water or energy. The pro-ecological attitudes in the sphere of communication mean acceptance for limitations on individual transport in favour of public transport in city centres (almost half of the respondents), only one in ten respondents declared against this idea and one in four was moderately against it in the study carried out in 2008 [www.ine-usd.org.pl]. As far as waste management is concerned a relatively big number of respondents support waste segregation and are interested in the role of local authorities in the organisation of segregated waste collection and its recycling. For the last 16 years there has been a systematic growth in the number of respondents who point to themselves and the local authorities as the entities obliged to undertake actions to improve environment. As far as our attitudes towards protected areas are concerned the study findings show that despite earlier protests of local people who perceived wildlife reserves as a threat to their existence nowadays local communities undertake actions to establish new or extend the areas of already existing parks.

Sustainable development has been a subject of public debate for a long time so it may be surprising that only one in three respondents (36% in 2008) were able to match this term with the correct definition.

Ecological awareness as an instrument of support for environmental management systems in companies

One of the many activities and projects undertaken under the framework of sustainable development is the initiative of the European Commission and the Member States to establish competitive and dynamic economy based on knowledge known as the Integrated Product Policy (IPP). This initiative should find its reflection in documents which lay down the priorities for ecological policy, including the programme „Infrastructure and Environment” and particularly axis 3 and 4 concerning the management of resources and prevention of environmental hazards as well as the adaptation of enterprises to environment requirements. However implementation of this project requires meeting such demands as: promotion of IPP, conforming to environmental requirements at all phases of a products' life-cycle, popularisation of environmentally friendly products and processes and taking into account the state of ecological awareness of the society including local communities as an important instrument of support.

All products cause environmental degradation in some way. The life-cycle of a product is often long and complicated. It covers all the areas from the extraction of natural resources, through their design, manufacture, assembly, marketing, distribution, sale and use to their eventual disposal as waste. Therefore it is justified to seek to minimise the product's impact on the environment by looking at all phases of a products' life-cycle and taking action where it is most effective. That is why popularisation of this knowledge in society is so important.

The IPP covers products and services and aims to improve the effectiveness of the use of resources and better management of natural resources and waste resulting in higher competitiveness of enterprises. Therefore the actors of this process should be: the entrepreneurs, science and research institutions, public administration, European institutions, ecological and consumer organisations and finally the consumers themselves, who, by demonstrating pro-ecological attitudes, should put pressure on producers to reduce the impact of the product on the environment in every phase from its production through use to its disposal as waste. The effectiveness of the process is determined by the use of the appropriate instruments such as ecological taxes, accounts covering all production costs (including environmental losses), ban on public support for activities causing harm to the environment and introduction of ecological terms in public procurement.

Along with the economic instruments it is important to remember about social factors and particularly about promotion of eco-labelling and eco-certificates for products and popularisation of environmental management in enterprises and EMAS (Eco-management and Audit Scheme) organisations. However the success of these instruments depends on the entrepreneurs and customers who should have access to environmental information about the product. As far as information in the broad sense is concerned there are consumer and ecological organizations whose responsibility is to educate, improve awareness concerning the analysis of the life-cycle of a product, promote development and the European labelling system, support the purchasing of eco-friendly products and exchange information between the Member States. The activity forming the ecological awareness of the society as an instrument to support sustainable development should also be undertaken by the entrepreneurs and public administration. It is their task to implement the basic principles of IPP such as the environmental management and participate in training courses on the analysis of the life-cycle of a product. However the key factor here is the state of the ecological awareness and motives of the entrepreneurs themselves as they determine if pro-ecological commitments will be made.

The reasons why small and medium enterprises (SME) undertake pro-environmental activity have been a subject of research carried out by the foundation Partnership for Development since 2002 within the framework of the programme „Pure Business”. The sample group for each study includes about 100 companies. In the last study carried out in September and October 2008 the sample group included 104 companies [www.czystybiznes.pl]. The main objective was to determine the degree of interest of SME representatives in implementation of pro-ecological practices in their companies. Additionally the researchers wanted to evaluate the degree of ecological awareness in studied companies. The assumed indicators of ecological awareness were e.g. the assessment of the company's impact on the environment and the awareness of hazards. As much as 68% of the respondents believe that their company operations have a minor impact on the environment while 25% of the respondents assess the impact as big and very big which has increased by 11% in comparison to the previous study. The hazard that was most often reported was the excessive use of energy (42% of respondents). About 34-34% pointed to gas emission, production of dust and sewage and use of water. The authors of the research recorded that in reference to earlier studies the respondents noticed new factors destructive for the environment apart from gas emission and waste disposal. There are interesting findings concerning the pro-ecological activities undertaken by entrepreneurs and their motives to do so. In the last study 53% of the respondents declared the intention to invest their own resources to implement new technological and organisational means to improve the environment. The purchase of new or modernization of owned facilities and technologies have been most frequently pointed to as an example of pro-ecological activity starting from the first studies. About 63% of entrepreneurs report that over the last 3 years some tangible actions have been undertaken to protect the environment. Mainly they concerned the reduction of used energy, improving the quality of the natural surrounding, reduction of gas emission, waste and sewage production and use of water. The factors determining the aforementioned decisions included the need to reduce cost and enhance company image (according to 50% of respondents). Additionally a considerable percentage of entrepreneurs pointed to financial resources as an important condition to introduce pro-ecological solutions and in the last years also the ecological awareness of the management was mentioned. All in all the research shows that in the future nearly 70% of companies intend to undertake activities aiming at direct or indirect improvement of the environment. However there are still entrepreneurs who claim that their companies have no impact on the environment (15%). Nevertheless over 60% of respondents believe that environmental issues can constitute a vital element of marketing strategy and may have positive impact on the company's image. The downside is that it will induce the increase of expenditure on environment protection from companies' budgets. So far this type of expenditure accounted for 4.5% of the overall cost. It is interesting to note that only one in three enterprises held a document specifying the company's pro-environmental activities which was almost 30% fewer than in the previous study. Therefore it would be valuable to find out why the companies have not initiated the procedures to obtain proper certificate especially as nearly half of them use environmental issues in their marketing strategies.

Conclusion

The knowledge about the ecological awareness of the society plays a major role in the state ecology policy programming and the selection of implementation instruments. This knowledge is particularly important for the implementation of the concept of sustainable development defined as justified economic development which is socially expected and ecologically acceptable. Since the ecological awareness of Polish society has only reached the phase when the system of values, assessments and behavioural norms are being formed it is worthy to continue research in the field. The findings will be helpful in implementing new tasks e.g. Integrated Product Policy project or the systems of environmental management in compliance with the expectations of both the consumers and entrepreneurs and with their active participation. As only their attitude and understanding of promoted activities can ensure the effective implementation of successive projects within the framework of sustainable development based on knowledge.

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Streszczenie

Świadomość ekologiczną społeczeństwa należy uznać za niezbędny społeczny czynnik zrównoważonego rozwoju. Zaprezentowano typologię świadomości ekologicznej wg podstawowych typów poznania oraz stan świadomości ekologicznej polskiego społeczeństwa na podstawie wyników badań prowadzonych przez CBOS na zlecenie Instytutu na rzecz Ekorozwoju. Podjęto również próbę wskazania, jak świadomość ekologiczna społeczeństwa jest istotnym społecznym instrumentem wsparcia, obok instrumentów ekonomicznych, we wdrażaniu zrównoważonego rozwoju gospodarczego opartego na wiedzy, a jednym z elementów tego procesu jest system zarządzania środowiskowego w ramach zintegrowanej polityki produktowej. Przywołano także wyniki badań ilustrujące stan świadomości ekologicznej samych przedsiębiorców.

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