

Bilan, Yuriy

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMPANY: BUILDING OF NEW LEVEL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CONSUMERS OF XXI CENTURY

Yuriy Bilan*

¹⁾University of Szczecin, Poland

Abstract

The article contains a brief description of the concept of sustainable development along with review of the literature considering the aspects of the organizations' responsibility towards consumers. Empirical research focusing on the issues connected with the existence or non-existence of the consumer of the XXI century is presented in the article. Research was conducted through examination of the current business behavior of the companies originating from Croatia, Poland and Ukraine; it covered 500 respondents from the companies operating in different business sectors. Results of the research showed that the concept of sustainable development continuously develops, the companies feel the influence of the shift in the consciousness of the modern consumers and are ready to change in order to comply with their expectations, they aspire to comply with the concept of the sustainable development because such compliance provides them with real economic benefits and building of the new level relationship with the consumers of the XXI century is one of the key factors of such development.

Keywords: sustainable development, organizations' responsibility, consumer awareness, relationship between companies and consumers, business behavior.

JEL Classification: D22, F63

Introduction

At the present moment the concept of the sustainable development is not just widely known in the modern globalized world, it is already the concept, which is broadly used by various legal entities and natural persons in their activity, for instance using energy-saving technologies. For now we can be sure, sustainability is a global phenomenon. Companies, such as those listed in global 500 of transnational companies, in the different parts of the world try to comply with the concept of the sustainable development focusing not only on their financial results, but overlooking their ethical, social, environmental and economic position in the society.

It is widely taken for granted that businessmen are running business for gaining profit. Several decades ago any sort of social, ethical or environmental responsibility was

* Corresponding author, **Yuriy Bilan** - yuriy_bilan@yahoo.co.uk

perceived not only by the society, but even by the business itself, like some kind of a popular game, in which the major players were transnational companies. But things change and now business treats any expenses for complying with the concept of sustainability as long-term investments into their competitiveness in the future. However, the concept of sustainability is constantly developing and the companies worldwide face new challenges in order to ensure their sustainable development. Nowadays, it is already not enough only to focus on complying with standards of ethical, social, economical and environmental responsibility.

The new challenges we are talking about are connected with formation of the new type of consumer, the consumer of the XXI century. Such new consumers have the high level of education and free access to information, resulting in high consumer awareness, which in its turn results in higher expectations from business itself, its behavior, products, services, etc. The modern consumers expect that the companies shall protect their life, health and shall ensure safety; also they expect that sustainable patterns of production and consumption shall be implemented. Additionally, they want to have complete and accurate information about products in order to make the best choice, and it is already not just the question of economic efficiency, it is the question of respect, consumers of the XXI century want to be respected by the companies they deal with, they expect satisfying of their needs in a sustainable way. They do not want to play in any games, if they feel that they are misled by the companies, they go away and choose another supplier. In general, we can say that consumers would like to build the new level of relationship with the companies based on the trust, responsibility and clarity. Forms of such relationship may vary between countries or businesses, but the main principles shall remain the same.

It is obvious that implementing strategies for sustainable development is beneficial for both, companies and society. The major benefits for the community include solving of social problems, increasing local growth and prosperity of citizens, improving the environment protection, more efficient usage of resources, etc. The companies in their turn form the positive image, receive more clear business identity, create sustainable corporate culture, reduce inherent risks and become more competitive.

In order to obtain various benefits from implementing the concept of sustainable development, the most important strategy is the clear understanding of it in a broader context and the successful solving of new challenges. Bearing this idea in mind we have considered the concept of sustainable development in more details, paying additional attention to organizations' responsibility towards consumers. Afterwards, we will try to verify whether new challenges connected with formation of the consumer of the XXI century really exist and if they influence the behavior of the companies.

General considerations regarding sustainable development

Several decades ago the concept of the business doing business only for gaining profit was the dominant one. Friedman's expression stating that, the only responsibility of business towards society is to use its resources for engaging in activities designed to increase its profits as long as it stays within the rules of the game, based on the principles of open and free competition, without deception or fraud, summarized the point of view of the great number of the economists regarding the issue (Friedman, 1962).

But things change and for now the companies apart from gaining profits are forced to perform actions aimed at maintenance of their long-term sustainable development. The companies are encouraged to engage in such activities by globalization processes, increasing demands of the consumers, authorities of different level or NGOs, mainly representing community, as well as by the wide implementation of achievements of the technological progress and more careful attention of media. It should be noted that at the present time the companies incorporate different aspects of the sustainable development concept into their activities and relations with all the parties concerned. However, we need to mention that each particular company introduces such concept in a unique way, which is defined on the basis of the company's understanding of the concept itself, its competences, resources, interests of the shareholders, cultural traditions, situation in the country and other factors influencing the company's activity (Zemigala, 2007). One of the current strategies, which is based on the approach mentioned above, is the Europe 2020 Strategy. In March 2010 this strategy was launched. Its main goal is to help Europe to recover from crisis and to make economy of the European Union prepared for the next decade. We would like to note, that mentioned strategy is based on the three main priorities, which reflect its main idea (Figure 1).

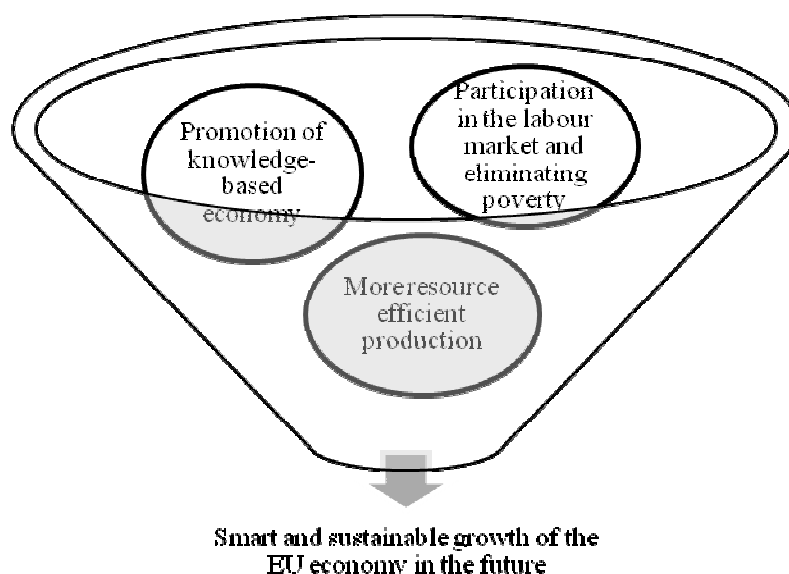


Figure no. 1. Basic principles and the goal of the Europe 2020 Strategy

Source: based on Europe 2020, A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. [online] Available at <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF>> [Accessed 12 July 2013].

The principles mentioned above reflect the modern perception of the EU regarding the concept of the sustainable development, but it does not give the full and clear understanding of such a complex and significant concept. In order to disclose the essence of the concept of the sustainable development and to define the main tendencies observed on the present global market influencing the behavior of companies all over the world we will analyze approaches of different economist to defining the sustainable development.

Literature Review

Despite the fact that social functions were attributed to the companies for many years ago, it should be noted that they were represented only by employees' benefits. That's why the concept of sustainable development in a modern understanding emerged only in the 1930s. Cyert and March believed that the source of social responsibility of the companies lies in the theory of the beam of goals. This theory is based on the fact that, each company has different goals. Therefore, in order to achieve the balance, the company has to plan its activities in compliance with the concept of the "beam of goals", which represents a compromise between the interest of different groups within the company (Gruszecki, 2002; Miron and Petrache, 2012). Another point of view, towards the issue mentioned above, was created by Crozier and Friedberg, they think that sustainable development approach, as formed on the basis of the game theory in the social sciences. Pursuant to the mentioned theory the companies try to reach the organizational balance, considering tangible assets and social issues (Peszko, 1999; Gallardo-Vazquez, 2012).

Developing the idea of the social issues to be solved by the companies Ackerman and Carnegie stated that they should help the poor (Kryk, 2005; Bernat and Bartkowiak, 2012). This concept became more significant due to existing global problems and it resulted in involvement of the company's environment in corporate responsibility. As a consequence, environment's assessment has become an issue to deal with for the companies, since social approval of company's activities and its results was already not just the question of goodwill; it was the question of existence.

It is obvious that sustainable development is a complex concept. It covers not only the commercial activities of the company, including concentration on receiving income, gaining revenues, etc., but it also includes activities dealing with social, economic and environmental issues. Rainey (2006) defines "sustainability" as a phenomenon which usually implies that all activities should be carried out at rates equal to or less than the Earth's natural carrying capacity, in order to renew resources and mitigate the wastes. It should be noted that there were developed so-called "Hannover Principles" upon which sustainable development should be based for achieving tasks mentioned above. Those principles were developed by McDonough (1992) and they (Figure 2) with brief description can be found below.

Rights of humanity and nature to co-exist	Interdependence	Respect as for relationships between spirit and matter
Responsibility for the consequences of design	Creation of safe objects with long-term value	Elimination of the waste concept
Promotion of the use of natural energy flows	Limitations of design	Making improvements through sharing knowledge

Figure no. 2. “Hannover Principles” of sustainable development

Source: based on McDonough, 1992

Rights of humanity and nature to co-exist. The main idea of the principle is in perception of the humanity, nature and business as equal parts of the global system. The companies, being the part of such system, need to change their attitude towards the system in a whole considering their responsibility, including social, economic and environmental issues.

Interdependence and respect as for relationships between spirit and matter. These two principles supplement each other, especially considering globalization processes and the complexity and variety of current economic transaction, which also include those connected with usage of disadvantaged workers and natural resources in developing countries. Consequently, they are of significant importance for companies aspiring to sustainable development. Taking into account existing relationships between nature and the economic activity of the companies, the last have to ensure that such activity are environmentally friendly and are not the threat to the human safety and health.

Responsibility for the consequences of design. This principle foresees responsibility of the companies for their decisions, especially when such decisions lead to negative impacts.

Creation of safe objects with long-term value. The purpose of introduction of such principle is to include into the structure of the companies’ interest, those connected with creation value for community and protection of the humanity (Rainey, 2006). This is one of the hardest changes to be made by the companies, since it foresees creation of the long-term value and it has almost nothing in common with obtaining of income here and now at any price.

Elimination of the waste concept. Managing waste problems is one of the key issues in reaching of sustainable development. Thus, the problem of dealing with wastes should be solved by means of taking care over collection, processing, reusing and recycling, recovering and disposing wastes.

Promotion of the use of natural energy flows. The mentioned principle brings attention of the companies to the problem of energy supply and suggests it’s solving through usage of

renewable energy solutions, for instance using solar, wind, biomass and other alternative sources of energy. Sustainably developing companies have to be energy sensitive and to implement energy saving technologies into their activities.

Limitations of design. The companies when creating new products shall bear this principle in mind in order to reach more efficient and effective production. Complying with such principle will allow to obtain better solutions and to be more competitive, not just in satisfying consumer needs and increasing quality of their life, but also in the ecological dimension.

Making improvements through sharing knowledge. The purpose of this principle is to encourage the companies to participate in knowledge production, not just consumption. The companies have to understand that they have the basis for generating new ideas, solutions, methods, techniques, etc. It should be clear for them, that such activities can provide them with competitive advantages through using their own innovation potential.

As we can see, the concept of sustainable development has numerous dimensions and consequently there are lots of definitions and it is very helpful in obtaining deep and comprehensive understanding of its phenomenon. Thus, it shall be noted that one of the most widespread definition is the one that was elaborated in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Report..., United Nations, 1987). The definition presented by the commission is the following: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Mentioned concept combines the idea of essential needs of the world's poor and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

Repetto, in his turn, defined sustainable development as a strategy that manages all assets, natural resources, and human resources, as well as financial and physical assets for increasing long-term wealth and well-being. Sustainable development as a goal rejects policies and practices that support current living standards by depleting the productive base, including natural resources, and that leaves future generations with poorer prospects and greater risk than our own (Pearce et al., 1997). This definition allowed to include in the concept of sustainable development the ideas connected with environmental, economic, social and equity issues, considering the limited nature of the world's resources.

All definitions of sustainable development are based on treating the global world as an interconnected system, which is influenced by the butterfly effect. In other words, the global world is sensitive on initial conditions in which a small change at one place may lead to large changes in the other place. Thus, we can assume that the concept of sustainable development is some sort of philosophical issue which influences the state of mind of all the parties involved.

The philosophical aspect of the concept of sustainable development is very interesting, but the economic one has more significant influence on the business behavior. Modern companies still mainly focus on their profits. However, the companies already feel that they are playing multiple roles which are not always connected with profits. Drucker emphasizes three main tasks for the people involved in decision-making of the companies, i.e. maintaining economic performance, increasing productiveness and efficiency, as well as managing social aspects. He indicates that business can be justified only when it is being good for society (Kotler, 2002).

Modern companies have the responsibility to contribute to the environment, and fulfill social and ecological objectives besides the economic ones, but we have to acknowledge that companies change their strategies only if it is really necessary. We are used to the fact that the companies change their strategies influenced by the following tendencies observed at the global market:

- *Development of the values and attitudes of the consumers.* We may state that consumers are pretty sensitive to social injustice. Additionally, they are critical to marketing activities undertaken by companies. From the consumers point of view, the companies bear responsibility for all negative consequences of any actions which can be directly or indirectly connected with them;

- *Increasing world-wide competition.* The necessity of each specific company is not just to compete with their national competitors, but with its global competitors forces them to expand their strategies and to carry more responsibility regarding social, ecological and environmental aspects;

- *Growing importance of intangible assets, including brands, trademarks, intellectual property, etc.* Nowadays, all mentioned assets significantly influence the market value of the company and consequently the companies make every effort in order to improve the image, confidence, or relationships with customers, etc.;

- *Environmental issues.* Activity of the modern human beings threatens ecosystem of the world and no one can foresee possible consequence of such irresponsible behavior. As of today we already have significant challenges connected with increasing demands for food, fresh water, etc. Ensuring stability of the ecosystem must be one of the key tasks of the governments, businesses and international institutions;

- *Poverty and pessimism.* Numerous researches reveal decrease of the level of optimism in all parts of the world with the growing inequality gap between different social groups, resulting in instability of separate regions of the world, which leads in certain cases to military conflicts;

- *World-wide economic stagnation and crisis.* The recent crisis and the following economic stagnation reminded the companies on the fact that the world is constantly changing and there is no safe place for them, if they have not created it. Such reminder was a significant one and lot of companies begun to treat the concept of sustainable development and necessity of its implantation more seriously.

All tendencies mentioned above are already well-known and were studied in the numerous researches, but bearing in mind the last idea relating to the constant development of the world and several researches connected with increasing consumer awareness, we assume that there is one more world-wide tendency influencing the companies' behavior. This is the tendency of the increasing organizations' responsibility to consumers. Does this tendency really exist? Do we really have the new type of the consumer, the consumer of the XXI century? Do the companies need to change their existing relations with customers? Shall the companies pay more attention to the protection of consumers' life, health and safety; issues related to sustainable consumption; providing complete and accurate information; after sales service, support, and resolving complaints and disputes and increasing level of education and consumer awareness.

Empirical research objectives / research methodology

In order to answer all those question we have performed the empirical research which in more details is described below.

For the purpose of this article, we have conducted a research study examining the degree and the extent of the implementation of sustainable development concept, mainly focusing on the influence of the aspects of the organizations' responsibility towards consumers on the markets of Croatia, Poland and Ukraine. The structure of the research was the following: first of all we described the questionnaire design and the sampling procedure we have used, as well as the key data regarding the sample. Afterwards, we presented results of the research and performed analysis of the key findings. Thus, we had one main section of the research, which contains the overall description of the problem and the investigation, as well as comparing of the data, including analysis of the relation between increasing of the organizations' responsibility towards consumers with business performance.

The design of the questionnaire included two sections. The first section contained questions regarding consumer awareness, quality and ethical issues, sustainability, building of relationship with the consumers on the basis of trust and respect, as well as questions focusing on the economic performance of the company.

When preparing the questionnaire we have used A Guidelines Manual for Retailers towards Sustainable Consumption & Production (2008) in order to receive adopted statements. We have applied a five-point Likert format for collecting information, the scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Also, the questionnaire includes statements that were adopted from studies of Krohmer et al. (2002), Ruekert et al. (1985) and Quazi (2003).

The empirical basis of the research was the survey based on the questionnaires for respondents (middle level managers) in companies representing various sectors of economy of Croatia, Poland and Ukraine. This approach allowed to cover almost all sectors of the economy and at the same time to represent specific features of individual countries. The choice of middle level managers was not accidental, according to assumptions of the author, this group of workers is the one which objectively assesses the situation in the company and has significant amount of information about the company and is less subject to fluctuations. Sampling was random, we applied proportion by size for it.

We may conclude that we have received satisfactory level of representativeness since all countries examined in the present research had proportional number of companies involved. There were 174 companies from Croatia (34.7%), 165 companies from Poland (33.1%) and 161 companies from Ukraine (32.2%).

Main activities of the companies, their size and age were contained in the second section of the questionnaire. Total amount of respondents included into the sample was 500; these respondents (middle level managers) represent different sectors. We have used PAP methodology as the main one in this research based on the structured questionnaire. The research was conducted from December 2011 to May 2012.

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Except from descriptive statistics calculations, before using items for further analysis, the reliability testing with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was conducted. We need to mention that we received the total value regarding the whole sample in amount of 0.67 in respect to our statements, covering the

issues connected with unemployment, building of local infrastructure, code of conduct, communication and their connection with economic performance, considering the fact that the recommended standard is 0.7. Cronbach Alpha coefficient reported of 0.81 regarding performance indicators and this is a good result. Alpha was applied since it is sensitive not only to general factor saturation in a scale, but also to group factor saturation and even to variance in the scale scores arising from variability in the factor loadings. Additionally, in order to study significance of findings and strength of relationship between key elements we applied the Spearman correlation coefficient.

For examination of different levels of relationship between variables there were calculated p values. It should be noted that conventional significance level of 0.05 was used for obtaining objectives.

Sample description

Information on the size, age and main activities of the companies in the sample can be respectively found in the tables 1, 2 and 3 below.

Table no. 1. Information on the size of the companies, %

No.	Size of the company	Croatia	Poland	Ukraine	Total
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1.	< 50 employees	36.5	24.7	41.8	34.3
2.	50-250 employees	17.6	28.4	41.8	29.0
3.	> 250 employees	45.9	46.9	16.5	36.7

Source: own research

Proceeding from the table No. 1 we can say that there are 36.7% of the companies having more than 250 employees (large one) and 34.3% of the companies with 10-50 employees (small one). It should be noted that the majority of companies from Ukraine are small and medium one; there is small number of large companies.

Table no. 2. Period of the companies' existence at the market %

No.	Age of the company	Croatia	Poland	Ukraine	Total
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1.	less than 5 years	9.4	12.3	17.7	13.1
2.	5-12 years	25.9	17.3	50.6	31.0
3.	more than 12 years	64.7	70.4	31.6	55.9

Source: own research

The results are evident for the case of Polish companies, 70.4% of the companies existing at the market over 12 years. Situation in Ukraine differs again; the majority of Ukrainian companies operate from 5 to 12 years, but one should bear in mind that this is a specific feature of Ukrainian market, since market relations started its development in this country only in 1991.

Summing up the information mentioned above, we may state that the sample consists of large companies from Croatia and Poland and small and medium-sized companies from Ukraine.

Table no. 3. Information on the main activities of the companies, %

No.	Main activity of the company	Croatia	Poland	Ukraine	Total
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1.	Retail trade	9.4	12.3	17.7	13.1
2.	Production	25.9	17.3	50.6	31.0
3.	Services	64.7	70.4	31.6	55.9
4.	Education	9.4	12.3	17.7	13.1
5.	Transport	25.9	17.3	50.6	31.0
6.	Tourism	64.7	70.4	31.6	55.9
7.	Wholesale trade	9.4	12.3	17.7	13.1
8.	Banking	25.9	17.3	50.6	31.0
9.	Insurance	64.7	70.4	31.6	55.9

Source: own research

Based on the information in the table above it is clear that companies from the sample are mainly involved in the services sector (32.3%) in all countries under examination. However, in the sample there were represented the companies from almost all main sectors of economy.

Main results

Going over to the essence of the research, it should be noted that aspects of the concept of the sustainable development dealing with the economic and consumer-related issues are mainly focused on the following areas: growth strategies, expenses, necessary recourses and possible results, development of relations with consumers, creation of communication channels, consumer education, etc.

Thus, understanding of the needs of the consumers, taking into account the concept of sustainable development, is vital for the companies. In the table below you will find the information on how the managers of the studied companies perceive economic and consumer-related considerations.

On the basis of the data in the table 4, we can conclude that the companies do not pay significant attention to their participation in the economic development of the local area. The mean regarding the company efforts in decrease of the unemployment is only 2.95. The next statement connected with local infrastructure has a relatively higher grade of 2.44, but still is not so significant.

The highest grades which equal to 4.30 and 4.18 were reached in respect to the statements connected consumers' needs and requirements and ensuring high-quality communication respectively. This is the evidence of the fact that companies feel the influence of emergence of the new consumer of XXI century and are ready comply with his/her expectations and

treat such new challenges as possibility to receive commercial advantages, even if it may lead to possible outflow of economic benefits (with the mean of 3.88).

Table no. 4. Economic and consumer-related considerations of the managers of the companies

No.	Information on the consideration	Mean	St.dev.
<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1.	Decreased unemployment in a local area	2.95	1.505
2.	Initiation of building of local infrastructure	2.44	1.502
3.	Internal code of good practice (including protection related issues, sustainable consumption)	3.36	1.474
4.	Compliance with the consumers' needs and requirements (including after sales service, support, and resolving complaints and disputes)	4.30	1.047
5.	Ensuring honest communication with consumers	4.18	1.095
6.	Providing detailed information (complete and accurate) about offers to consumers	3.88	1.321

Source: own research

Consequently, we may state that companies performing their activities in the territory of Croatia, Poland and Ukraine have the understanding and respect the customer-related aspect of the concept of sustainable development.

Moreover, they directly connect their efficiency with the level of their compliance with the need and requirements of the consumers and society in the whole. Bearing in mind that expectations of different target groups of the companies are different, the companies are ready to provide them with things they want and in the way they want in order to obtain various economic benefits and to decrease possible negative impacts. Correlation between economic and consumer related efforts of the companies and achieved results may be seen in the table no. 5.

After studying the results given in table no. 5, we can see that effective adaptation to changes in the market environment and issues connected with the consumer-related efforts are weakly connected. In general, the companies understand the need of implementation of the internal codes dealing with ethics, good practice and the need to become more oriented towards their consumers for ensuring their sustainable development. It is taken for granted that honest communication, based on the trust and mutual respect, with consumers providing detailed, complete and accurate information may result in increasing economic benefits and reduction of business risks. But it should be noted that we have expected more strong connection in respect to this issue.

Almost the same result was received after evaluating the level of relationship between compliance with the consumers' needs and requirements (including after sales service, support, and resolving complaints and disputes) and ensuring honest communication with consumers.

Table no. 5. Links between the companies' efforts and relevant results

No.	Result	Effort of the company*	Spearman coefficient
1	2	3	4
1.	Efficient adaptation to changes in the market environment	(3) (4) (5)	0.244 0.296 0.291
2.	Adding value to the consumers	(5) (6)	0.192 0.206
3.	Contributing to development of the local employment market	(1) (2) (4) (5)	0.392 0.250 0.219 0.234
4.	Protection of consumers' rights	(3) (4) (5) (6)	0.252 0.349 0.363 0.253
5.	Responsibility towards employees	(3) (4) (5) (6)	0.295 0.303 0.381 0.272
6.	Responsibility towards consumers	(1) (3) (4) (5)	0.220 0.234 0.214 0.221
7.	Employees involvement	(3) (4) (5) (6)	0.209 0.257 0.313 0.230

* - Numbers are used according to the numeration in the table No. 4

Source: own research

Proceeding from the data in the table No. 5, we may conclude that companies' responsibility towards consumers and their contribution to the local employment market have positive correlation almost to the same elements of the economic and consumer-related aspects of the sustainable development.

Additionally, it should be noted that the table above also evidences positive correlation between the level of employees' involvement in business transactions and the implementation of the internal code of good practice (including protection related issues, sustainable consumption). This is really promising, since employees are the people who in fact deal with consumers in the day-to-day activities and are influencing the quality of communication with consumers and we can expect constant improvement of such communication in future. Similar results are found in the case of companies' responsibility towards employees.

Conclusions

Results of the research lead us to the conclusion that the concept of sustainable development continuously develops. Ecological, economical, social and environmental problems, as well as challenges connected with developing of the consumers, make the companies concerned with existing level and quality of relationship between them and the society, their employees and their consumers. On the one hand new challenges and expectations of the consumers force the companies to develop and introduce policies which foresee their strategy as for dealing with social, ecological and other problems. On the other hand such actions of the companies positively influence their image, increase competitiveness and lead to higher market value.

Proceeding from the results of the empirical research it is clear that the companies already feel the influence of the shift in the consciousness of the modern consumers and that all the challenges connected with increase of the consumers awareness and respective increase in their expectations towards receiving of relevant protection, sustainable consumption, obtaining of complete and accurate information and etc. do really exist. Additionally, it was revealed that companies successfully dealing with challenges mentioned above perceive them as new possibilities in a competitive environment.

We expect that the trend towards increase of the consumers' demands on companies shall remain in the future and number and variety of such demands shall grow constantly, which is a consequence of increasing consumer awareness, growth of educational level and development of the consumer's culture. At the present moment we can clearly observe the growth of the middle class all over the world, as a result we have more wealthy people who buy more goods, but such people have higher expectations regarding goods and services, as well as the companies itself. At the same time, IT technologies provide us with easier access to any information connected to the companies. Such situation, results in growing significance of transparency in relationship between the companies and consumers.

Going back to the results of the research, we see that companies originating from Croatia, Poland and Ukraine have the understanding of the necessity to build new level of relationship with the consumers; they feel the need to respect the consumer and respectively adjust their strategies of sustainable development. The companies have clear understanding of the connection of their success with their ability to comply with requirements of the consumers and markets. However, upon results of the research we have revealed that the level of involvement of the companies from different countries in dealing with the new challenges of sustainable development varies and that they focus on different aspects connected with such challenges. For instance, Ukrainian companies focus more on quality of the products and services, as well as after sales support, resolving any complaints and ensuring high-quality communication with their consumers. Polish companies use more efforts connected with provision of complete and accurate information on their offers to consumers. Simultaneously, Croatian companies, despite the fact that they are aware on the necessity of increasing of the companies' responsibility towards consumers, are almost not involved in activities which increase such responsibility.

Summarizing results of the article we can state that sustainable development is a necessity, which is faced by the companies all over the world, not just in the developed countries as one might believe. The companies aspire to comply with the concept of the sustainable development because such compliance provides them with real economic benefits and

building of the new level relationship with the consumers of the XXI century is one of the key factors of such development, resulting in its turn in consumers' confidence towards sustainable companies, which is a strong competitive advantage in the globalized world.

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