

## Sustainable and Regional Development in European Union

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### Abstract

*Regional development is one of the most important and difficult development policies of the EU. Its goal is to reduce the economic and social inequality between different European states, defending development and economic growth in the field of SMEs, transport, agriculture, development of villages and towns or environmental protection.*

*Sustainable development means a dignified life, combining both financial aspects, by improving the standard of living, and aspects related to environmental protection, which consist in adopting a socially responsible behavior, by selective garbage collection or choosing alternative methods of transport with zero emissions. These are just a few aspects that a growing part of Romania and the European Union citizens are beginning to consider, according to the quantitative research conducted by applying an online questionnaire.*

**Key words:** sustainable development, regional development, European Union

**J.E.L. classification:** K40

### 1. Introduction

This theme is of major importance both globally and regionally, as it should be the starting point for all public policies. Sustainable development is an imperative requirement of the present, which aims at a sustainable economic growth and the thoughtful use of natural resources, so that future generations will enjoy the same benefits as those of today.

### 2. Theoretical background

#### 2.1. General considerations on the concept of sustainable development

All human threats such as climate change, inequality, poverty and hunger can only be addressed on a global scale by promoting the concept of sustainable development, which means economic and social development, the reasonable use of natural resources and the development of individual well-being. Sustainable development refers to improving the lives of all, anywhere in the world, by respecting these principles. Countries' economies need to grow, companies need sustainable development and people need to work in decent, non-life-threatening conditions. This can be done by replacing old and polluting technologies with new, innovative, efficient and non-polluting ones.

The Brundtland Commission report has become a global agenda for change and has come at a time when the UN General Assembly has realized that there is a serious threat to the environment and natural resources, as many climate threats that have not been adequately addressed. The organization aimed to promote the idea of a united international community, with common goals and objectives, that identify sustainability issues all around the world and come up with solutions to them.

Following the publication of the Brundtland Report and the definition of sustainable development in 1987 as "development that seeks to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", the concept was enriched along the way, but also adapted to current socio-economic issues. (Ionel Popa, 2010)

Therefore, we deal with the concepts of: (Ionel Popa, 2010)

- sustainable ecological industrial development;
- sustainable logging;
- sustainable energy;
- sustainable trade;
- sustainable water management;
- sustainable jobs.

"People have the right to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature; nations have the sovereign right to exploit their own resources without causing damage to the environment. Nations need to protect the environment. Where there are threats that could lead to serious consequences or irreversible damage to the environment, scientific uncertainty should not be used to delay cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation. " (United Nations, 2012)

Sustainable development was initially intended to be a solution to the economic crisis caused by the intense industrial exploitation of resources and the degradation of environmental factors. Initially, this concept presumed that both development and the environment, approached so far as separate themes, could be managed together in a harmonious development. Today, the concept of sustainable development has extended to the quality of life and is an imperative requirement of the present. It no longer means only economically sustainable development, but also individual well-being, creating a perfect harmony between personal and economic layers.

The Sustainable Development Strategy is a current priority of the European Union Plans, with a special emphasis on environmental protection. This strategy is not only European, it is also a global strategy promoted all over the world by a variety of international treaties, underlining once again the complex features of the concept of regional extension and the internal cohesion of the EU's principles of sustainable transformation.

## **2.2. Sustainable development in relation to environment, economy and transport**

The consequences of climate change, of environmental pollution, are as old as time, and until recently, the only goal of human evolution was economic development, without emphasizing sustainable development. Thus, the global interest in the field of environmental protection became of interest at the end of the twentieth century, when negative changes in the environment became a reality.

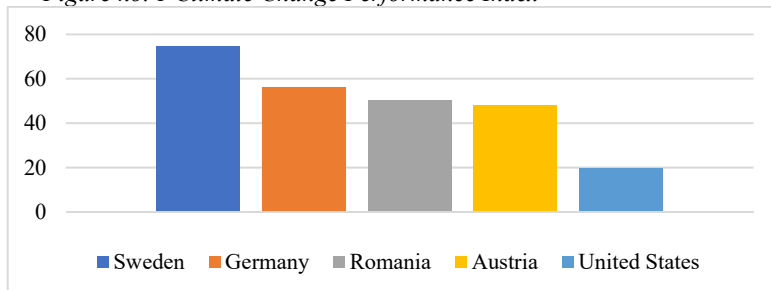
Now, even if all the countries worldwide would take the necessary steps to reduce carbon emissions, a warmer climate in the future is inevitable, because environmental pollution, careless resource use without thinking of sustainable development, has negatively influenced and will continue to influence the quality of life for generations while creating irreparable damage to the environment.

The first documents on environmental protection were published in the middle of the twentieth century by the European Coal and Steel Treaty in 1951, and by the Treaty on European Economic Community in 1957. These treaties mainly regulated health conditions and occupational safety, but for the first time they also mentioned elements of environmental protection. They were a milestone for what followed in the field of European public policy making. (Costică Mihai, 2009)

In 1986, after years of talking about a real "ecological revolution", the first document laying down the legal basis within the Community in the field of environmental protection appeared, was the Single European Act. The directors of large steel companies operating in the European continent are beginning to become familiar with notions such as systematic approach, sustainable development or ecological balance. These concepts were either unknown or under-applied in the run-up of the act. (Costică Mihai, 2009)

Transport is responsible for almost 30% of carbon dioxide emissions in the European Union. The Union, through its institutions, aims to reduce transport emissions by 60% by 2030 and by 2050 tends to climate neutrality in all Member States. (European Parliament, 2018)

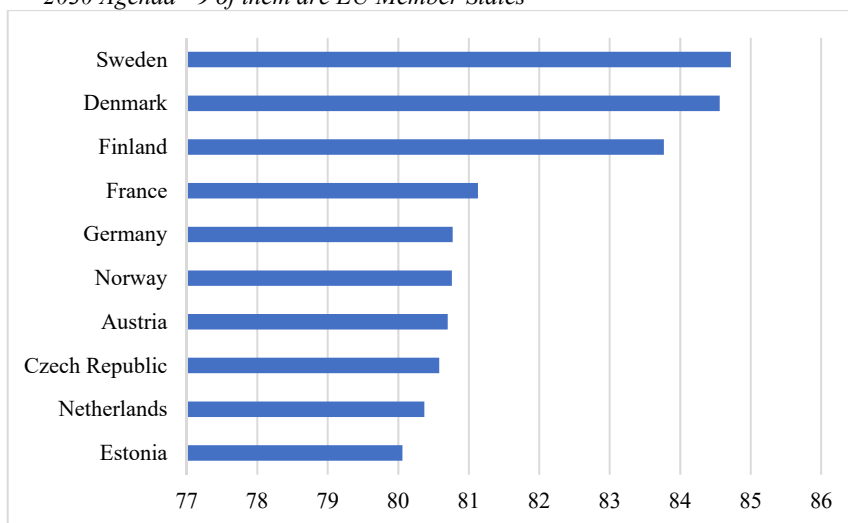
Figure no. 1 Climate Change Performance Index



Source: <https://ccpi.org/download/the-climate-change-performance-index-2021/>

Globally, the Climate Change Performance Index, published in late 2020 by the Germanwatch NGO, shows nations that take climate change seriously and seek to combat it, as well as countries that do not make enough efforts to do so, even though they have the financial and social resources. Sweden ranks first in the ranking, with very good scores in the areas of greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy and environmental policies. Paradoxically, one of the richest and most developed countries in the world, the United States, is in last place, with environmental activists not impressed by efforts to combat climate change, especially since the country has chosen to leave in 2020 the most important contemporary agreement on climate change, overturning the effects of the Paris Agreement, signed in 2015.

Figure no. 2 Top 10 countries in the world in implementing sustainable development goals under the 2030 Agenda - 9 of them are EU Member States



Source: <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/rankings>

Based on data from the United Nations, we can see in the chart above, a ranking of the 10 leading countries in implementing the 17 goals of sustainable development included in the 2030 Agenda. Nine Member States of the European Union are among the top 10 countries globally, which shows that the community bloc is in a pole-position in implementing these sustainable development goals.

Sweden, a Member State of the European Union and an active promoter of sustainable development, is currently leading the global trend in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda objectives. Both effective implementation of Sweden's objectives through coherent government decisions and the life style of the citizens made these processes go smoothly, thus reiterating the healthy values of Swedish society, and the perfect connection between the Mayn actors of the society, the social, economic and political environment. Through the democratic path Sweden has had the opportunity to develop a model of social welfare with the ambition of guaranteeing all its citizens free access to quality medical services, a free and effective education process, affordable housing and sufficient jobs for all levels of educational training. (United Nations, 2017)

### 2.3. Regional development in the European Union

EU Regional Policy or Cohesion Policy is a policy based on the allotment of funds, supporting the creation of new jobs, seeking to strengthen economic and social growth by improving the quality of citizens' life and the development of underdeveloped regions.

Cohesion policy also shows the EU's unity within its Member States and less developed regions, pooling funds in areas and sectors where they are able to have value, aiming at reducing the significant economic, social and territorial disparities that still exist between the European countries. Such differences could undermine some of the EU's core principles, including its single enlarged market and its currency, the euro.

Reducing inequality at regional and national level is an important goal, both for each member state of the European Communities and for a European Union seen as a multistate and multilingual organization knowing for a fact that inequality between regions and states can be a major obstacle, even a barrier, to deepening integration.

As a majority strategy of the European Union - aiming at increasing economic and social unity - it is in fact a multicolor of a single market, eliminating the internal borders between EU Member States, summing up, by the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty on 7 February 1992 and by the appearance of the European single market, almost 250 regions that are part of Community policy objectives.

The new objectives of the transformation policies of the regions seen from the EU's point of view appear as a unit of national communities that undergo serious changes over time, both in terms of the new objectives and the tools used, aiming at the beginning, the diminution of territorial and spatial instabilities. Nowadays, these policies are emphasizing their value within the principles of Community policies, alongside with political, monetary and economic union, one of the most important policies of the European Union.

### 3. Research methodology

In order to identify citizens' perceptions of the concept of sustainable development, we conducted a quantitative research, based on the application of an online questionnaire (153 respondents) using the Google Forms platform.

In order to achieve the proposed goal, we established the following hypotheses:

1. If most people are familiar with the concept of sustainable development, then they are more likely to adopt responsible behaviors, being more inclined to selectively collect garbage, to choose transport alternatives that do not use fossil fuels or to limit water consumption, when possible.
2. If this concept of sustainable development is relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century society, then it should be implemented both by the decision-making authorities in the implementation of public policies, but also by the citizens without leadership positions in those communities.
3. If most respondents are at least moderately familiar with the concept of sustainable development, then they are more likely to choose the products they want to buy from brands that have a good reputation for environmental protection.

### 4. Findings

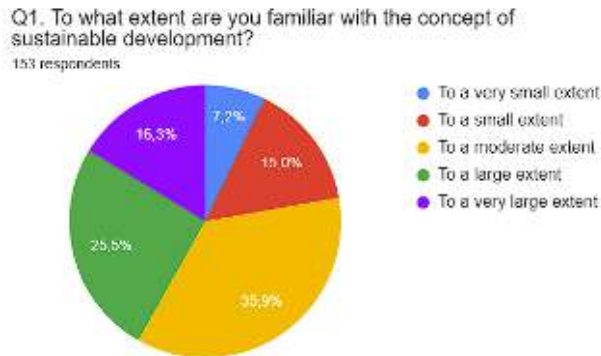
The respondents were 51% (78 people) women, and 49% men (75 people).

The questionnaire was answered by both people under 20 (5.9%) and people over 60 (1.3%). The age group from which the most answers were received is the one of 20-29 years (45.1%), at the opposite pole being the age group 60 years<sup>+</sup>, which counted in proportion of only 1,3% .

Most respondents came from urban areas (86.9%), representing a total of 133 people, while 13.1% were from rural zones (20 people).

Regarding the level of completed studies, 45.8%, (70 of those surveyed) said they had graduated high school, and only 4.6% said they have not graduated high school (7 respondents were included in this category).

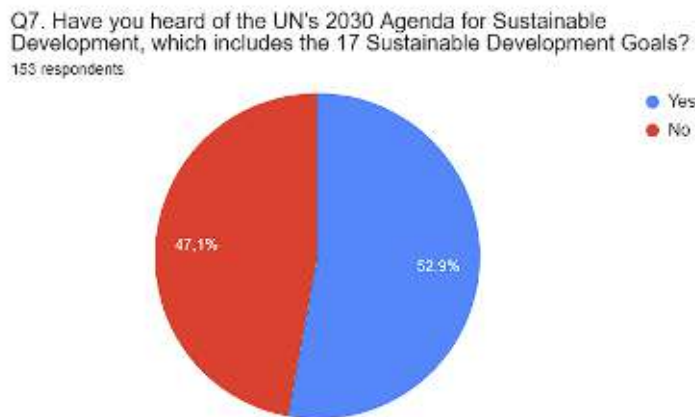
Figure no. 3 The degree of familiarity of the respondents with regard to the concept of sustainable development



Source: Authors' contribution

According to the results obtained from the questionnaire applied to the respondents, most of them, in a percentage of 35.9%, stated that they are familiar to a moderate extent with the concept of sustainable development presupposes. The percentage of 25.5% belongs to those who know a lot about the concept of sustainable development. 16.3% say they are very familiar with it. The concept of sustainable development is known to a small extent by 15% of those surveyed, and 7.2% say that they master the topic of the questionnaire to a very small extent.

Figure no. 4 Respondents knowledge of the 2030 Agenda



Source: Authors' contribution

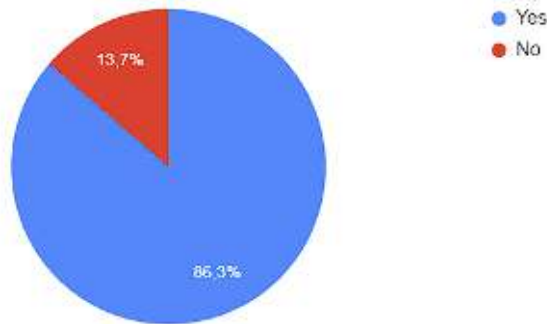
The 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Objectives were adopted in 2015 by the member countries of the United Nations. Its content applies to all countries and political and social actors, reiterating the need for climate action, gender equality, low unemployment and the promotion of civil society.

Hence, about Agenda 2030 heard a little over half of the total number of respondents of the questionnaire we applied (52.9%), while a significant number of 47.1% of those surveyed mention that they have not never heard of the 2030 Agenda.

Figure no. 5 The perception of the respondents regarding the consumption of natural resources

Q12. Do you consider yourself a thoughtful person when it comes to consuming natural resources?

153 respondents



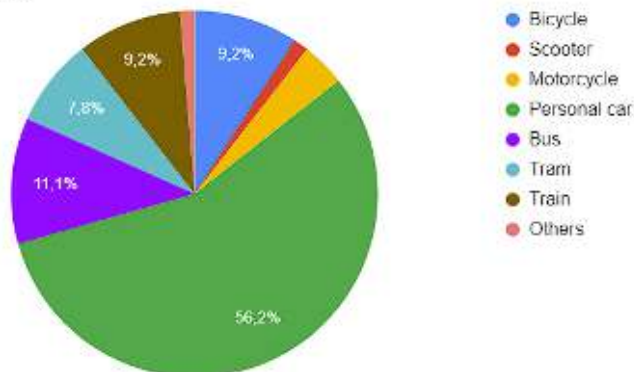
Source: Authors' contribution

To the question "Do you consider yourself a thoughtful person when it comes to consuming natural resources? (Do you limit water consumption when possible, for example?)" the vast majority of respondents claim they are thoughtful, while only 13.7% voluntarily say they do not consider themselves thoughtful when it comes to consuming natural resources.

Figure no. 6 Respondents' preferred means of transport

Q13. Which mode of transportation do you prefer?

153 respondents



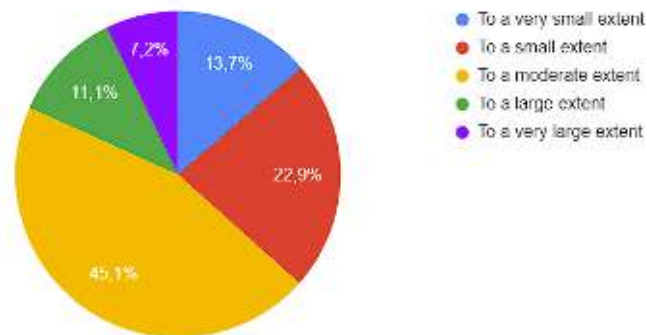
Source: Authors' contribution

The question no.13 aims to find out the respondents' preferred means of transport. The question has been an open one, with many options including the "Others" option too. Thus, 56.2% of those who answered the questionnaire have as a favorite means of transport their own car, 11.1% the bus and an equal percentage of 9.2%, the train and the bicycle. On the other hand, only 1.3% have a scooter as their preferred means of transport, and 1.3% state in the "Others" section that they prefer walking.

*Figure no. 7 The importance of the company's reputation for environmental protection in choosing a product, as a customer*

Q15. When shopping, to what extent does the company's reputation for environmental protection matter in the choice of the product you intend to buy?

153 respondents



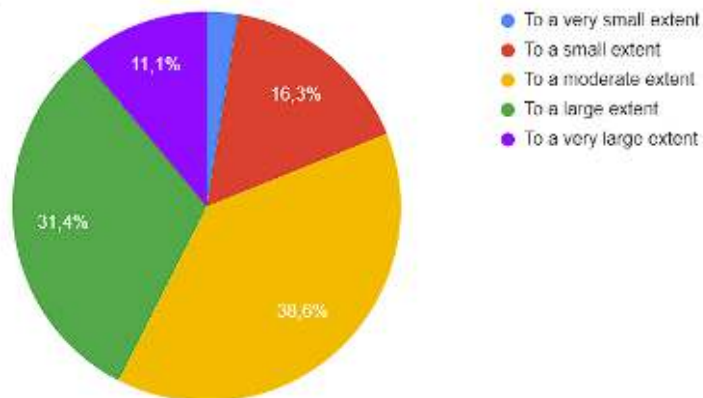
Source: Authors' contribution

To the question "When shopping, to what extent does the company's reputation for environmental protection matter in the choice of the product you intend to buy?", 45.1% of respondents chose "on a moderate extent". 22.9% selected "to a small extent". The "very small extent" option was chosen by 13.7% and only 7.2% say that the company's reputation for environmental protection matters very much when choosing the product they want to buy.

*Figure no. 8 Respondents perception of how pollution is affecting them*

Q21. To what extent do you consider that you are affected by pollution?

153 respondents



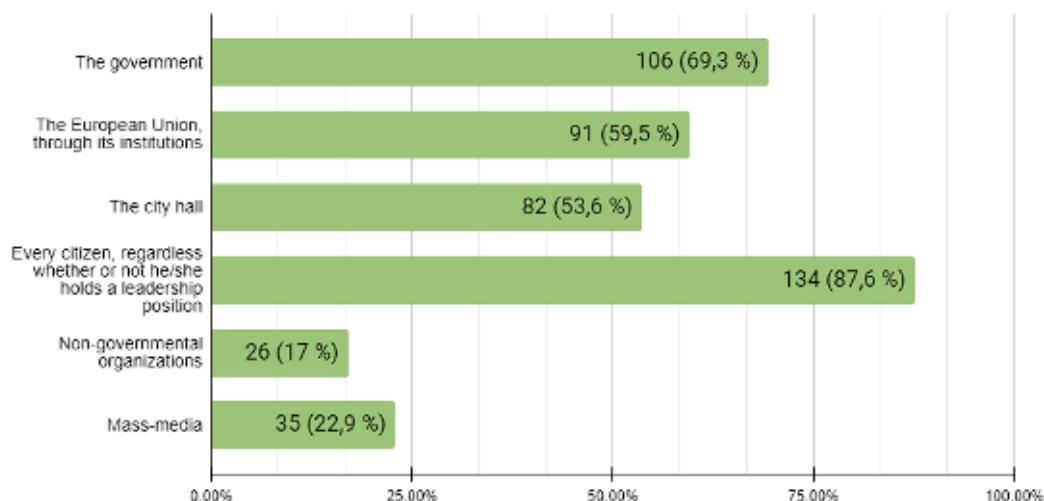
Source: Authors' contribution

The question "To what extent do you consider that you are affected by pollution" has had divided options. Thus, 38.6% consider themselves to be affected by pollution to a moderate extent, 31.4% to a large extent, while 16.3% of the respondents consider themselves to be affected to a small extent. Only 11.1% consider themselves to be very affected by pollution, and 2.6% choose the "very small extent" option.

Figure no. 9 Perception of respondents on the importance of decision-makers in environmental protection

Q22. Who do you think should be in charge of environmental protection?  
(Multiple answers can be selected)

153 respondents



Source: Authors' contribution

To the question “Who do you think should be in charge of environmental protection? (Multiple answers can be selected)”, the vast majority of respondents (87.6%) believe that this activity should be performed by every citizen, regardless whether or not he/she holds a leadership position. The government is the second decision-maker chosen by the respondents (59.5%), and the European Union, through its institutions, should also proactively deal with environmental protection, this option being chosen by 59.5% of respondents. The mayor's office is also an important factor in environmental protection, according to 53.6% of the respondents. Only 22.9% and 17%, see the media and non-governmental organizations as having a responsibility to protect the environment.

## 5. Conclusions

The first hypothesis was confirmed based on the answers received in the questionnaire. Therefore, 77% of respondents understand the concept of sustainable development at least on moderate extent (taking into account both *to a large extent* and *to a very large extent* options). Moreover, 72.5% of the respondents, state that they choose to selectively collect garbage, 68% voluntarily state that they use an alternative means of transport, such as bicycle or scooter, when possible, to the detriment of conventional means of transport, and 86.3% of respondents consider themselves prudent when it comes to the consumption of natural resources, limiting the consumption of water when possible.

The second hypothesis is confirmed by the answers received to the question no.22 “Who do you think should be in charge of environmental protection? (multiple answers can be selected)”, most of the respondents highlighting the importance of each citizen, regardless whether or not one holds a leading position in the implementation of public policies.

The third hypothesis is refuted in the light of the answers received to the question no.15 “When shopping, to what extent does the company's reputation for environmental protection matter when it comes to choosing the product you intend to buy?” Most respondents mentioned a moderate to low level of 85% (taking into account the responses from the small and very small extent options) in influencing their decision based on the company's reputation for environmental protection.

The common citizen can influence the application of every aspect of sustainable development. Starting from the right information on the Sustainable Development Goals/Objectives, any individual could provide assistance, even by simply reporting the problems he/she encounters every day that negatively affect his/her life. Active citizens are encouraged to take part in voluntary activities, such as sanitation in natural areas or awareness-raising activities about the dangers of accidental dumping.



Even less active people can lead a sustainable lifestyle by reducing their electricity consumption or switching to electronic bills (eliminating unnecessary paper consumption). Reducing water consumption, consuming less animal food or selective waste collection are just a few of the solutions that any citizen, whether or not having a leadership position, can apply today.

Companies have the leverage to implement the concept of sustainable development with a considerably greater impact than that of a simple citizen. They should adhere to policies that involve a reduction in the consumption of natural resources. Furtheron it should also be borne in mind that employees spend an average of eight hours a day or a third of their adult life at work, and a healthy work environment would ensure a high level of mental and physical health. Firms should scrutinize the entire distribution chain to ensure that the materials from which they make their products come from sustainable sources.

The Romanian government is increasingly confronted with the complex problems caused by the challenges involved in economic and social development or environmental protection. It has a crucial role to play in implementing sustainable development policies, which can only be achieved through a medium and long-term vision and cooperation with civil society and companies.

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