

## SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Manuela-Dora ORBOI, Adrian BĂNEȘ, Ioan PETROMAN, Mirela MONEA, Ioana BĂLAN

*University of Agricultural Science and Veterinary Medicine of the Banat, Teaching Staff Training and Social Human Sciences Department, Calea Aradului, nr. 119, Timișoara, România;*  
Corresponding author: manuela\_dora@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** *The paper analyses how the concept of sustainable development is defined, its principles and objectives, as well as the role and importance of the sociological dimension in creating a model of sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development is the totality of socio-economic development forms and methods not only on the short or medium term, but also on the long term. The basis of these methods is the balance between the socio-economic systems and the elements of the natural capital. Sustainable development as a concept has materialized during decades, within the framework of thorough international scientific debates, and has assumed political potential through globalisation. The central principles behind sustainable development are equity and fairness among countries and generations, the long-term vision on the development process, systemic thinking and interconnection between economy, society and the environment. Sustainable development is linked with the concept of quality of life and pursues three objectives: economic welfare, social stability and environment protection. Any project should approach all three dimensions of sustainable development: environment, economy and society. The social dimension is concerned with social inclusion, demographic changes and public health. Environmental programmes will fail unless they set permanent human welfare as their objective. Underestimating the role of social factors in sustainable development will endanger the development programmes and projects. The medium and long-term fair assessment of human capital and the evolution tendencies are crucial for the realistic perspectives of a sustainable development model in all its fundamental components: economy, society-culture, and environment. In Romania, the demographic trends are worrying. On the long run, the trends are negative. According to estimations from national and international sources, and not taking into consideration external migration, however, admitting a significant increase in life expectancy at birth, Romania's population could decrease from 21.4 million in 2008 to 21.2 million in 2013, 20.8 million in 2020, 19.6 million in 2035, and 16.9 million in 2060. The objectives of sustainable development for 2030 cannot leave out the effects of demographic evolution on the long and very long term. Sustainable development involves meeting the necessities of the current generations without compromising the capacity of the coming generations to satisfy their own needs. Sustainable development principles are time-driven and may lead to successful results of current environmental provisions, while serving the interests of human society.*

**Key words:** *sustainable development, quality of life, demographic trends*

### INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is a complex concept that has started with the concern for the environment. In time, it has been enriched with an economic and a social dimension.

In the beginning, sustainable development was meant to be the solution to the ecological crisis caused by heavy industrial exploitation of resources and continuous environmental deterioration. Its main goal was to preserve the quality of the environment. At present, the concept of sustainable development also embraces the quality of life both from the economical and the social perspective.

The concept of sustainable development is the totality of socio-economic development forms and methods not only on the short or medium term, but also on the long term. The basis

of these methods is the balance between the socio-economic systems and the elements of the natural capital. Sustainable development as a concept has materialized during decades, within the framework of thorough international scientific debates, and has assumed political potential through globalisation.

The relationship between mankind and the environment became a matter of great concern for the international community at the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) and was given a concrete form in the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development, created in 1985. The Commission Report, entitled *Our Common Future*, was presented by G. H. Brundtland in 1987 and provided the first accepted (and often quoted) definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

The concept of sustainable development is the result of an integrated approach of political and decisional factors, in which environmental protection and long-term economic growth are considered to be complementary and interdependent. The complex matters of sustainable development acquired a global political dimension as they were debated at the summit-level Earth Summit on Environment and Sustainable Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly which adopted the Millennium Goals (2000) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg (2002). As a result, local and global action plans have been developed.

The central principles behind sustainable development are equity and fairness among countries and generations, the long-term vision on the development process, systemic thinking and interconnection between economy, society and the environment.

Four key objectives have been established based on the major principles of sustainable development:

- environmental protection through measures that allow the separation of economic growth from negative environmental impacts;
- social equity and cohesion through observance of fundamental human rights, cultural diversity, equal chances and elimination of all forms of discrimination;
- economic prosperity through the promotion of knowledge, innovation and competitiveness with an aim to ensure higher living standards and full high-quality employment;
- meeting EU's international responsibilities through the promotion of democratic institutions in the interest of peace, security and freedom and of the principles and practices of sustainable development.

The EU Sustainable Development Strategy, which provides the foundation for the National Strategy of Romania, is complementary to the Lisbon Strategy and is intended as a catalyst for public policy makers and for the public opinion. The aim of the strategy is to change the behaviour of the European and Romanian societies and to secure the active involvement of policy makers, both public and private, and individual citizens in the preparation, implementation and monitoring the objectives of sustainable development.

Some of the general objectives of the EU Strategy for Sustainable Development are the following:

- to reduce climate changes, costs and negative effects on society and the environment;
- to ensure a transport system that meets the economic, social and environmental needs of the society and minimises their negative impact;
- to promote sustainable production and consumption patterns;
- to improve management and avoid overexploitation of natural resources;

- to promote equal access to public health;
- to promote social inclusion by taking into consideration solidarity between and within generations;
- to ensure security and high living standards as a prerequisite for individual welfare;
- to promote sustainable development actively on a large scale and to ensure the coordination of the EU domestic and foreign policies with the international engagements regarding sustainable development.

As far as the quality of life in general and quality of rural life in particular are concerned, a set of specific goals, the sustainable development indicators, have been agreed upon. (Table 1)

The European Union and its Member States have the responsibility for the implementation of the Strategy by involving all institutional components at national and EU levels. The importance of close collaboration towards the goals of sustainable development with the civil society, business, social partners, local communities and citizens is also underlined.

The Brundtland Commission Report, *Our Common Future*, revealed the need to approach development and environmental imperatives concomitantly. Since the report has been published, great efforts have been made to make the concept of sustainable development operational — the theme of the World Bank's World Development Report in 1997. Progress will be made if three standpoints are taken into consideration:

- the *economic* methods intend to maximise welfare despite the constraints imposed by the existing capital stock and the available technologies;
- the *ecologic* perspective underlines the importance of preserving the integrity of the ecologic subsystems which are considered to be vital for the stability of the global ecosystem;
- the *sociologic* perspective stresses the fact that the key actors are the human beings, whose social organisation patterns are crucial for the identification of viable solutions to sustainable development problems.

Table 1

Sustainable development indicators – quality of life				
Areas	Specific goals	Indicators	DPSIR	Targets
Quality of life in urban areas and quality of environmental infrastructure in general	To ensure water distribution for high living standard; to reduce pollutant emissions and to keep pollutants under a certain threshold to avoid the deterioration of human health, ecosystems and cultural heritage	- Percentage of population having access to drinking water distribution;	D	To double the share of population having access to drinking water distribution by 2015  To improve the infrastructure of the centralized water distribution and sewerage networks in urban and rural centres
		- number of inhab. Having access to the centralized water distribution network;	D	
		- connecting the population to the centralized water and sewerage services;	P	
		- streets with water networks;	P	
		- water loss in the distribution networks;	I	
		- age of the water distribution network;	P	
		- number of wastewater treatment stations;	I	
		- urban population exposed to air pollution.		

*Sustainable development* is linked with the concept of *quality of life* and pursues three

objectives: economic welfare, social stability and environmental protection. (Figure 1)

- *Economic welfare* aims at generating a maximum income flow through maintaining the capital that has brought benefits;
- *Stability of social and cultural systems* ensures the human capital that is necessary for any form of development, reducing destructive conflicts;
- *Environmental protection* – sustainable development aims at preserving the biological and physical stability of natural systems.

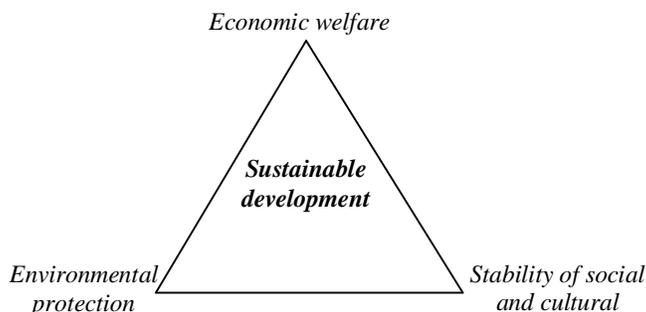


Fig. 1. Sustainable development objectives

The *minimal requirements* for sustainable development are the following:

- *redimensioning economic growth* for reasonable resource allocation and high production quality;
- *poverty eradication* through meeting the essential needs of the population: job, food, energy and water supply, a place to live in and health;
- acceptable population growth (*controlled demographic increase*)
- *natural resource preservation and increase* through maintaining ecosystem diversity and monitoring the impact of economic activities upon the environment;
- technological shifting and the *control of technological resources*;
- *government decentralization*, active involvement in the decision-making process;
- *corroborating national and international decisions* regarding environment and development;
- global unification of decisions on the environment and economy.

The main concern of the sustainable development strategy is the human community in space and time and the creation of a cohesive system that is able to cover the costs generated by economic-social growth, pollution prevention and its negative effects.

According to the community legislation, the EU Member States must include the concept of sustainable development in all the projects and programmes running with structural funds in order to contribute to a balanced, sustainable and innovative European economy.

#### **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The paper analyses how the concept of sustainable development is defined, its principles and objectives, as well as the role and importance of the sociological dimension in creating a model of sustainable development. Any project should approach all three dimensions of sustainable development: environment, economy and society. The ecological dimension is concerned with sustainable consumption and production, natural resource preservation and management, climate change and clean energy. The economic dimensions deal with socio-economic development and sustainable transport, while the social dimension envisages social

inclusion, demographic changes and public health.

People can be regarded both as beneficiaries and victims of all development activities. Their active involvement in the development process is the key to success. The social dimension is concerned with social inclusion, demographic changes and public health. Environmental degradation affects poor countries especially, because they lack proper protection equipment.

The social components of development are as important as the economic and technological ones. Underestimating the role of social factors in sustainable development will endanger the development programmes and projects.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

As a rule, sustainable development is supported with economic, technological and ecological arguments, but its social component is at least as important as they are. Failing to admit the chief role of the “social actors” has had a negative impact on many programmes aimed at sustainable development.

Sustainable social development implies avoiding major problems:

- the tensions caused by the major discrepancies between the rich and the poor; a society that is divided after this criterion cannot be stable on the long run;
- forbidding a language or cultural community, an ethnic community or a nation to oppress other communities;
- systematic inobservance of human rights; history has demonstrated that such cases cause violent political conflicts which are incompatible with sustainable development.

The phrase “man above all”, often found in investment programmes intended to support development or spontaneous development assistance, is not an empty slogan; it simply means admitting the chief role that the social actors and their institutions play in sustainable development. Sustainability must be “built” socially and its three aspects — economy, environment and society — must be approached simultaneously.

The sociological dimension adds at least two sets of elements to sustainable development. In the first place, it provides a number of concepts that help explaining social actions, human relations, the complex forms of social organisation, institutionalised arrangements and culture, motivations, incentives and values that shape man’s attitude towards his fellow creatures and natural resources. In the second place, it provides social methods for the prompt coordination of social actions and acts as a barrier against harmful behaviour, stimulating association, alternative social arrangements and social capital development.

Programme planners in search of sustainability are often unaware of the wide range of social management tools and cultural mechanisms that can be used to encourage social dynamism and coordinate actions towards development programmes. These tools vary from creating a public conscience to investing in human capital, from simple consulting activities to developing participatory management; from enhancing traditional values and old practices to introducing innovation; from authorisation to increased social cohesion; from the individual behaviour determined by economic motivations to exploiting the power of solidarity, self-organising confidence and group values.

These tools can be combined to change the existing social patterns and promote the resource protection culture. For instance, the planners involved in forest exploitation programmes have several strategic options for planting trees: community, family or small group -focused approaches.

Like technological and economic strategies, social strategy must be decided upon from the very beginning and its purpose should always be to create or consolidate institutional associations.

### CONCLUSIONS

The medium and long-term fair assessment of human capital and the evolution tendencies are crucial for the realistic perspectives of a sustainable development model in all its fundamental components: economy, society-culture, and environment.

The medium and long-term objectives of the strategies and national, regional and sector programmes should be readjusted according to demographic estimations.

The EU27 population is projected to increase from 495 million on 1 January 2008 to 521 million in 2035, and thereafter gradually decline to 506 million in 2060. There are projected to be considerable differences between the individual Member States. Between 2008 and 2060, the population is projected to rise in thirteen Member States and fall in fourteen. The strongest population growth is projected to be found in Cyprus (+66%), Ireland (+53%), Luxembourg (+52%), the United Kingdom (+25%) and Sweden (+18%), and the sharpest declines in Bulgaria (-28%), Latvia (-26%), Lithuania (-24%), Romania (-21%) and Poland (-18%).

In Romania, the demographic trends are worrying. On the long run, the trends are negative. According to estimations from national and international sources, and not taking into consideration external migration, however, admitting a significant increase in life expectancy at birth, Romania's population could decrease from 21.4 million in 2008 to 21.2 million in 2013, 20.8 million in 2020, 19.6 million in 2035, and 16.9 million in 2060.

Table 2

The evolution of total population (thousand persons)

Country	Population number		Growth since 2008 (%)		
	2008	2035	2060	2035	2060
<b>EU27</b>	<b>495,394</b>	<b>520,654</b>	<b>505,719</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>2.1</b>
Belgium	10,656	11,906	12,295	11.7	15.4
Bulgaria	7,642	6,535	5,485	-14.5	-28.2
Czech Republic	10,346	10,288	9,514	-0.6	-8.0
Denmark	5,476	5,858	5,920	7.0	8.1
Germany	82,179	79,150	70,759	-3.7	-13.9
Estonia	1,339	1,243	1,132	-7.2	-15.4
Ireland	4,415	6,057	6,752	37.2	52.9
Greece	11,217	11,575	11,118	3.2	-0.9
Spain	45,283	53,027	51,913	17.1	14.6
France	61,876	69,021	71,800	11.5	16.0
Italy	59,529	61,995	59,390	4.1	-0.2
Cyprus	795	1,121	1,320	41.1	66.2
Latvia	2,269	1,970	1,682	-13.2	-25.9
Lithuania	3,365	2,998	2,584	-10.9	-24.3
Luxembourg	482	633	732	31.3	51.7
Hungary	10,045	9,501	8,717	-5.4	-13.2
Malta	410	429	405	4.5	-1.4
Netherlands	16,404	17,271	16,596	5.3	1.2
Austria	8,334	9,075	9,037	8.9	8.4
Poland	38,116	36,141	31,139	-5.2	-18.3
Portugal	10,617	11,395	11,265	7.3	6.1
<b>Romania</b>	<b>21,423</b>	<b>19,619</b>	<b>16,921</b>	<b>-8.4</b>	<b>-21.0</b>
Slovenia	2,023	1,992	1,779	-1.5	-12.1
Slovakia	5,399	5,231	4,547	-3.1	-15.8
Finland	5,300	5,557	5,402	4.9	1.9
Sweden	9,183	10,382	10,875	13.1	18.4
United Kingdom	61,270	70,685	76,677	15.4	25.1
Norway	4,737	5,634	6,037	18.9	27.4
Switzerland	7,591	8,798	9,193	15.9	21.1

Source: Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Communities, 119/2008

The objectives of sustainable development for 2030 cannot leave out the effects of demographic evolution on the long and very long term (table 2).

The long-term demographic and economic effects of the massive birth rate decline in the first half of the 1990's and the fact that is stayed low thereafter will be felt after 2025-2030, when the generations born after 1989 will occupy the central position in the reproductive and economically active segment of the country's population. For 100 adult individuals (aged 20 to 59) there will be 50 elderly persons (aged 60 and over) in 2030 and 85 by mid-century, against only 34 in 2007. Given these figures, the setting of sustainable development objectives for 2030 cannot ignore the long and very long-term demographic trends. Such trends have significant consequences in all areas of the economic-social life (labour force, education and professional training, social and health services, regional development etc.)

Given the mentioned consequences, the development of a Population Strategy for Romania has become a long-term (up to 2050) and very long-term national priority (until the end of the century) containing concrete, science-based proposals for a set of proactive measures that should be compatible with the principles of sustainable development and with fundamental human rights aiming to stabilize the situation and reverse the current trends.

Such a Strategy will have to pursue three main goals:

- to improve the state of health, reduce mortality and increase the mean life expectancy;

- to avoid a significant growth of outward migration;

- to encourage higher birth rates; this requires a thorough evaluation of the current pro-family policies and the urgent development of measures for family protection and support through entitlements (financial transfers) and better social services accessible to all.

The development of such a Strategy, which will be costly and will cover a long period of time, requires consultation with all social factors and good knowledge of the policies and practices that are being pursued in other European countries. It is also necessary to establish a highly authoritative institutional structure having the tasks to monitor the continued implementation of the Strategy, to evaluate the results periodically and to adjust measures and procedures accordingly.

Sustainable development involves meeting the necessities of the current generations without compromising the capacity of the coming generations to satisfy their own needs.

Sustainable development principles are time-driven and may lead to successful results of current environmental provisions, while serving the interests of human society.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. CAMASOIU CAMELIA (coordinator), *Economia si sfidarea naturii (Economy and the defiance of Nature)*, Economica Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994
2. CONSTANTIN D.L., *Introducere in teoria si practica dezvoltarii regionale (Introduction to Regional Development Theory and Practice)*, Oscar Print Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000
3. GEORGESCU G., *Reforma economica si dezvoltarea durabila (Economic Reform and Sustainable Development)*, Economica Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995
4. IANCU A., *Cresterea economica si mediul inconjurator (Economic Growth and the Environment)*, Politica Publishing House, Bucharest, 1979
5. POPESCU I., BONDREA A., CONSTANTINESCU MADALINA, *Dezvoltarea durabila – o perspectiva romaneasca (Sustainable Development – A Romanian Perspective)*, Economica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005
6. ZAMFIR C., STANESCU SIMONA (coord.), *Enciclopedia dezvoltarii sociale (Encyclopaedia of Sustainable Development)*, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi, 2007
7. \*\*\*, *Strategia Nationala pentru Dezvoltare Durabila a Romaniei (National Sustainable Development Strategy of Romania)*, Horizon 2013-2020-2030, Bucharest, 2008