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## Sustainable development as "the light at the end of the tunnel" for contemporary ecology = Zrównoważony rozwój jako "światło w tunelu" współczesnej ekologii

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# Sustainable development as „the light at the end of the tunnel” for contemporary ecology

Zrównoważony rozwój jako  
„światło w tunelu”  
współczesnej ekologii

The beauty of this land makes me want to ask for its preservation for future generations. If you love this native land, let this call not go unanswered! I appeal especially to those who have been entrusted with the responsibility for the country and its development so as not to neglect their duty to protect it against environmental destruction! Let them create programmes to protect the environment and ensure that they are effectively implemented! Above all, let them shape the attitude of respect for the common good, the laws of nature and life! Let them support organisations that are committed to the goal of protection of natural resources! The family and school education cannot fail to teach in respect for life, for the good and the beautiful. All people of good will should work together in this great work.

John Paul II, Speech, Zamość, 12 June 1999.

The concept of sustainable development emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. When humanity realised that the on-going process of environmental degradation is the result of thoughtless and waste-

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ful policy, and the human and instrumental treatment of the natural environment and its natural resources. Despite our hopes, scientific and technological progress, and economic growth did not solve these environmental and social problems, and the resulting environmental crisis deepened and sharpened. Environmental degradation and the inevitability of irreversible changes forced international bodies to start looking for solutions, the purpose of which would be to protect the environment on a global scale. Cooperation expanded between international organizations which coordinate the actions of specific countries and international regional organizations.

The spectrum of probable environmental disaster destroyed the existing security and forced people to revise both their views and actions. Sustainable development has become an alternative for further economic development, leading to good quality of life for communities who consider the needs of the natural environment without excessive exploitation of natural resources.

The concept of sustainable development was first introduced in 1972 at the UN Conference in Stockholm on the natural environment and economic development. There also was a declaration that stated: "Man has the inalienable right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life in an environment that allows him to maintain his dignity and to live in prosperity. So man bears great responsibility for protecting and improving the environment for present and future generations<sup>1</sup>".

At the meeting, it was found that during the implementation of the idea of eco-development, the priority was the widely understood eco-development uninterrupted by economic growth, which allowed for the maintenance of homeostasis in nature. This requires from societies cost-effective production, prudent consumption and extensive recycling, and the most important thing: awareness of the consequences of actions taken in terms of the needs and health of future generations.

In general, the concept of sustainable development is the constant direction of economic and social progress, remaining in a consistent relationship with the natural environment.

The programme for sustainable development, as mentioned earlier, aims to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. At the same time these activities are based on economic development linked to the activities related to the rational use of natural resources while protecting the environment. The basis for the understanding of the concept of sustainable development is to know that it is a relationship between the

natural environment, society and economy. Understanding these relationships requires adequate knowledge of these three areas, which, as a result, will translate into their conscious and rational action. Social, and most importantly economic activities based on the principles of sustainable development can be seen in the economic and political strategies of both the developed and developing countries: “further economic development and social progress should be developed in harmony with the natural system, sustainable development should also ensure the harmonious coexistence of man and the economy in nature. The socio-economic system should be so harmoniously embedded in the environmental system to ensure that its resources are reasonably used for present and future generations. This harmony and rationality cannot be achieved solely by the market mechanism; the involvement and intervention of state is necessary”<sup>2</sup>.

Development that focuses on meeting these needs without the over-exploitation of natural resources also creates a cost-effective economy allowing future generations to enjoy the benefits of the Earth. An awareness of natural resources depletion is a good enough reason to take drastic measures and actions to prevent such a situation. The economies of developed countries, which use natural resources to a greater extent than is necessary to meet immediate needs, has almost led to an environmental disaster. “The result of not fully thought-out business and consumer activity was a degradation of the environment that does not provide healthy and safe living conditions”<sup>3</sup>. An indicator for future activities should be to understand that “(...) environmental resources need to be given back to the future generations, in order to guarantee a worthy life and work (...)”<sup>4</sup>.

It is necessary at the present times to stop the uncontrolled economic growth leading to environmental degradation. The alternative is sustainable development, which is not intended merely to slow down economic development but only its negative consequences for the environment. It seems important to distinguish the two terms: growth and development. “Growth in one area is not identical with development, as exemplified by the even economic growth achieved at the expense of the environment. Thus, development can be described in simple terms as an increase in the number of aspects, towards the good. Sustainable development is a specific socio-economic development achieved by man and for a man -

<sup>2</sup> G. Czerewko, I. Rudyńska, *Zrównoważony rozwój jako podstawa wzrostu gospodarczego i jakości życia*, [in:] *Człowiek a koncepcja zrównoważonego rozwoju*, ed. B. Kościak, M. Sławińska, Warszawa 2009, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> J. Jabłoński, *Zrównoważony rozwój w Strategii Lizbońskiej*, [in:] *Zrównoważony rozwój i ochrona środowiska w gospodarce*, ed. B.M. Dobrzańska, D. Kielczewski, Białystok 2007, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> S. Wrzosek, *Geneza uregulowań prawnych dotyczących realizacji zrównoważonego rozwoju*, [in:] *Rozwój zrównoważony na szczeblu krajowym, regionalnym i lokalnym – doświadczenia polskie i możliwości ich zastosowania na Ukrainie*, ed. S. Kozłowski, A. Haładaj, Lublin 2006, p. 107.

so that, through the use of natural resources, all the inhabitants of the Earth can satisfy their needs, while not taking away the chance for future generations. It follows a well-known concept of intergenerational justice”<sup>5</sup>.

The natural environment is the common good for the whole humanity, but, as noted by John Paul II, contemporary modern man possesses a “desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, consumes in excess and in an orderly way the earth’s resources, thereby also endangering their own lives. (...) Man thinks he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as if it did not have its own requisites and a prior destination designated by the God, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Rather than play the role of a co-worker of God in creation, man sets himself up in place and eventually provokes a rebellion of nature, rather tyrannised than ruled”<sup>6</sup>.

Such expansive human activities disturb the balance of all ecosystems, and also impact adversely on health. Piles of trash produced by people, toxic chemicals and excessive exploitation of resources, forces us to search for new alternatives. Various types of ecological processes such as waste segregation, recycling, the use of renewable energy sources are beginning to play a huge role. Renewable energy sources are “sources which use in the processing: wind, solar, geothermal, waves, sea tides and river falls, biomass, biogas and the biogas produced in the process of discharge or wastewater treatment or the distribution storage of plant and animal remains”<sup>7</sup>. The benefits of renewable energy are enormous; above all, they do not excessively burden the natural environment; they are also much more economical than traditional sources of energy and most importantly, their use does not result in long-term deficits associated with natural restoring.

The idea of sustainable development “is the basis for the formation of a new planetary phase of human civilization founded on the values of justice within and between generations. For the sustainability of socio-economic development, it is necessary to harmonize the four major orders in which human life functions, the orders are: ecological, socially-institutional, economic and spatial”<sup>8</sup>.

The concept of sustainable development is an opportunity to preserve an ecologically safe world for future humanity. The potential of pe-

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<sup>5</sup> W. Wytrzątek, *Wdrażanie zasady zrównoważonego rozwoju w działaniach samorządu terytorialnego*, [in:] *Rozwój zrównoważony na szczeblu krajowym, regionalnym i lokalnym – doświadczenia polskie i możliwości ich zastosowania na Ukrainie*, red. S. Kozłowski, A. Haładyj, Lublin 2006, p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Paweł II, *Encyklika Centesimus Annus* nr 37, [in:] *Encykliki Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, Wydawnictwo M, p. 671.

<sup>7</sup> Ustawa z 10 kwietnia 1997 r. Prawo energetyczne, tekst jednolity Dz. U. 2006, no 89, pos. 625 with further changes.

<sup>8</sup> J. Gierczycka, *Ewaluacja wspólnych polityk Unii Europejskiej w kierunku zrównoważonego rozwoju*, [in:] *Ekologiczne problemy zrównoważonego rozwoju*, red. D. Kielczewski, B. Dobrzańska, Białystok 2007, p. 62.

ople and the environment should be activated; this will ensure their harmonious cooperation with the environmental preservation of wealth passed down indefinitely from one generation to the next. Economic development, which in essence does not affect the balance and order of the natural environment, is neither simple nor easy to achieve; however, it is the only way to preserve the biological basis of the phenomenon of life on our planet.

Sustainable development is not just a philosophy of life for people who are aware of the ongoing environmental degradation; it has also received legal status. The essence of eco-development is defined in the report *Our Common Future* of 1987, developed by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. This report shows problems, whose significance has increased to a global scale; they are: “the natural environment protection, social development and economic growth and the consequent equitable sharing of the benefits (...)”<sup>9</sup>. The seriousness with which it was treated, “have set ways of thinking appropriate to modern civilization. From this point, these problems have become the key topics on which attention was focused, mostly in the discussions of international bodies”<sup>10</sup>. The formal adoption of sustainable development took place in 1992 at a conference in Rio de Janeiro Environment and Development often referred to as the Earth Summit from which 27 principles of sustainable development were presented; five documents setting out the basic principles of environmental protection were also adopted:

1. Rio Declaration on Environment and Development,
2. Agenda 21 (global agenda),
3. Declaration on forests,
4. Convention on Biological Diversity,
5. Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Agenda 21 is a set of recommendations and guidelines for actions to ensure sustainable and balanced development in the economic practice of states at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Another summit which formulated a clear statement that sustainable development is the only possible way to improve the quality of life for all inhabitants of the earth without the damaging exploitation of the land’s natural resources was the Johannesburg summit in 2002. The final declaration included a reference to building a humane, equitable and caring global society, and to respect human dignity.

<sup>9</sup> A.F. Bocian, *Procesy globalizacji a zrównoważony rozwój. Szanse Polski*, [in:] *Zrównoważony rozwój i ochrona środowiska w gospodarce*, ed. D. Kielczewski, B. Dobrzańska, Białystok 2007, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p.150.

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The importance of action for sustainable development is contained in the content of art. 2 of the Treaty on European Union of 7 February 1992, where it is stated that the European Union “Works for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, social market economy aiming at full employment and social progress and a high level of protection and improvement of the natural environment. It supports scientific and technical progress”.

Moreover, the Polish Constitution includes provisions relating to sustainable development; these are:

- Article 5: RP shall: (...)safeguard the national heritage and protect the environment, guided by the principle of sustainable development.
- Article 68: Public authorities shall (...) prevent the negative health consequences of environmental degradation.
- Article 74: Public authorities shall pursue policies ensuring the ecological security of current and future generations (...). Support the activities of citizens to protect and improve the environment.
- Article 86: Everyone is obliged to care for the environment and is responsible for causing its deterioration<sup>11</sup>.

Including the principles of sustainable development in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland entails far-reaching legal consequences. The idea has become a Directive imposing obligations on public authorities to ensure the protection of the environment through appropriate policies ensuring the ecological security of current and future generations. To sum up, all of these provisions seek to recognise the environment as a constitutional value on which all actions should be subject to a process of interpretation and the application of the relevant provisions of the Constitution.

The definition of the concept is included in the act on the protection of the environment in which the concept of sustainable development “shall be understood as the socio-economic development, in which we observe the process of integrating political, economic and social actions with the delicate balance of nature and the durability of basic natural processes in order to ensure the ability to meet the basic needs of communities and citizens of both the present generation and future generations”<sup>12</sup>. The mechanisms governing the implementation of the constitutional principle of sustainable development is contained in the legislature in art. 8 of the Act. In art. 71 the legislature clearly indicates that “the principles of sustainable development and environmental protection are the basis for the preparation and updating of the concept of national spatial develop-

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<sup>11</sup> Polish Constitution of 2 April 1997, J. 1997, No. 78, item. 483, with further amendments.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. 3 points. 50 of the Act of April 27, 2001, the Environmental Protection Law, Acts. Laws 2001, No. 62, item. 627, with further amendments,p.76

ment policy, strategy for development of regions, provinces, development plans, study of conditions and directions of the commune and localities' spatial development plans"<sup>13</sup>.

A state under the law shall ensure the conservation wildlife as part of its environmental policy; it implements development strategies, development plans, various forms of environmental protection, conservation plans for individual areas, and areas that are part of nature. The conservation objectives under the Act are:

- 1) maintenance of ecological processes and ecosystem stability,
- 2) preservation of biodiversity,
- 3) preservation of the geological and paleontological heritage,
- 4) ensuring the continuity of species of plants, animals and fungi, and their habitats for the maintenance or restoration to favourable conservation status,
- 5) protection of landscape, greenery in cities and villages and trees,
- 6) maintaining or restoring natural habitats to a favourable conservation status, and also other resources and components of nature,
- 7) development of an appropriate human attitude towards nature through education, information and promotion in the field of nature protection<sup>14</sup>.

Realisation of the above mentioned tasks require in socio-economic life the use of the following principles of sustainable development:

- sustainable development of the economy, recognising the responsibility to protect the environment as being fundamental,
- managing component, and its violations as an illegal activity;
- including environmental concerns in economic planning;
- the rule of law;
- the polluter pays;
- elimination of pollution at source;
- economisation of actions in the field of environmental protection through the introduction of certain market mechanisms (charges for the use of the environment, preferential loans and investment grants, differentiation of environmental taxes, the depository system, market power);
- regionalism;
- socialisation;
- the joint resolution of European and international environmental problems<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p.78.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 2 of the Act of 16 April 2004 on the conservation of nature, uniform text. Laws of 2009, no 151 item. 1220, with further amendments.

<sup>15</sup> M. Łuszczuk, *Koncepcja rozwoju zrównoważonego w polityce ekologicznej państwa*, [in:] *Ekologiczne problemy zrównoważonego rozwoju*, ed. D. Kielczewski, B. Dobrzańska, Białystok 2007, p. 54.

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The main factor for ensuring the long-term success of the sustainable development is involving young people to participate in social dialogue, giving them easy access to information, and to encourage them to achieve the objectives, plans and actions for sustainable development. Today's child will in several years become an adult citizen, who will take over the responsibility for the fate of our planet. If we appropriately manage the training and education of children there is a good chance that they will become advocates of ecology.

Education, in general, is the process of transferring and acquisition of knowledge, skills and values. According to W. Okoń, education is "... all the processes that aim to change people (...) according to the prevailing social ideals and educational purposes"<sup>16</sup>. An education objective that is of major importance in terms of education for sustainable development, and is even more important than acquiring knowledge and mastering skills, is developing in students a positive attitude towards nature, and exploration of the values inherent in the natural environment.

Eco-values emphasize the importance of existence on Earth and in the Universe. The life which men are endowed with is linked inextricably with all forms of life on Earth. They are also obliged to take a certain positive attitude, according to which eco-values "give us power and impose responsibility for everything. We are part of the great sacred tapestry called the cosmos. We constitute its fine particles, but are extremely important, because we are conscious weavers [...] The heritage of our life, the planet Earth itself, the desire to live in peace and in harmony of a meaningful life, is common for us all"<sup>17</sup>. The pro-ecology attitude sees the heritage of life through the prism of connections and relationships between biological structures, but also values as something that gives meaning to human life. It also determines the choices and decisions, creates the conditions for educating a man who loves people and surrounding nature. It is something that has shaped a sense of responsibility for the environment now and will do so in the near future.

The adverse relationship between man which has growing industrial and technical potential, and the biosphere of the Earth representing the natural environment, requires actions that can be achieved through education for sustainable development. Such an education denies consumerism, and instead emphasizes ecological values as being those that can reorganise norms of social life. Education for sustainable development is

a response to the growing natural environment crisis, the conviction of the need to make changes in our behaviour; it is something that will help preserve the ecological balance. It promotes critical thinking, active environmental attitudes and active participation in decision-making processes. Education for sustainable development emphasises the need to protect the environment and its resources, respect biodiversity and a man-assigned diversity due to the possessed dignity.

The meeting of the United Nations and UNESCO called the Earth Summit in 2002 in Johannesburg established the years 2005-2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. This education promotes a holistic picture of the relationships between man, society and nature, the implementation of such assumptions, and as a result, leads to complex changes in the sphere of education, development and the verification of actions taken in the current education system at all levels of education. Man lives in a symbiotic relationship with nature; he is dependent on it which makes him also responsible for the changes that are made in the natural environment. Thus, teaching young people to take responsibility for nature should become an essential part of the educational process.

Environmental education aims to develop an intelligent and responsible society, one that accepts the principles of sustainable development, is able to perceive and evaluate the risks of environmental safety and to participate in the making of decisions. In its actions, environmental education involves specific objectives that are included in the document "The education for sustainable development. National Strategy for Environmental Education"<sup>18</sup>:

1. Creating awareness and rising public interest in the interrelated economic, social, political and environmental issues.
2. Allowing everyone to acquire knowledge and skills necessary to improve the condition of environment.
3. Creating new models of behaviour, shaping attitudes, values and beliefs of individuals, groups and communities, taking into account the quality of environment.

Environmental education is an issue that has significant international meaning, finding its implications in Poland. In recent years, there have been many conferences on this topic. Documents which were created during these conferences contain recommendations that were later reflected in the legislation of states co-participating in the deliberations.

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<sup>18</sup> *Przez edukację do zrównoważonego rozwoju*. Narodowa Strategia Edukacji Ekologicznej, Ministerstwo Środowiska, Warszawa 2001, p. 8.

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One of the main documents implementing the fundamental aims of environmental policy is the VI Program of Actions<sup>19</sup>, which states the four priority areas of environmental policy:

- climate change – a set of actions to reduce air pollution and mitigate the resulting climate change in Europe,
- nature and biodiversity – the goal in this area is to protect and restore the structure and functioning of natural systems, while inhibiting the process of the loss of biodiversity in the European Union and the world,
- environmental and health – the goal is to achieve such a quality of environment that does not threaten human health, and does not have a negative influence on it, including measures that aim to reduce emissions of hazardous substances, reduce the use of pesticides, climate changes and noise,
- natural resources and waste – the aim is to ensure that the consumption of non-renewable and renewable resources do not go beyond the capacity of the environment by decoupling the economic growth from resource consumption, improving their efficiency and reducing waste production. With regard to waste, the main objective is to reduce the final amount by 20% by 2010 and 50% by 2050.

Education for sustainable development is carried out in the formal and informal system. The first system covers the entire educational system (ranging from kindergarten to the end of university studies); actions are governed here by the curriculum currently in force. Foundations and associations are dealing with non-formal education. The oldest Polish organisation, founded in 1927, is the Nature Protection League. It organises a wide variety of projects (“Polish Festival of Forget-me-not”, the program “Do not burn the grass”, “Protection of chestnut trees” etc.), and as the first has also prepared a report on the condition of Polish environment. Many Polish and international organisations implement projects related to environmental protection, environmental education including the popularising of eco-living, shaping ecological attitudes, actions for the conservation of wild or endangered animals<sup>20</sup>.

We are all using the benefits of nature when receiving natural resources as tangible benefits. Nature offers us something even more important: the influences and experiences that come out of its beauty and its majestic character. Using the benefits of nature, we should always remember that our behaviour, habits, preferred lifestyle, recreation and nutrition has an impact on the environment. Through a common effort we need to stop the on-going process of degradation of the environment for the sake

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<sup>19</sup> [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/agriculture/environment/128027\\_pl.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/agriculture/environment/128027_pl.htm) (dostęp: 25.07.2012).

<sup>20</sup> Szerzej D. Cichy, *Obszar edukacyjny filozofii zrównoważonego rozwoju*, „Edukacja biologiczna i środowiskowa” 2011 no 1, p. 87-91.

of future generations. We should understand that the idea of sustainable development is not only protecting the environment, it is also a whole range of measures to compensate the level of life of all inhabitants of the Earth. The growing gap between rich and poor increases the strength of the terrorism, which is now international, and results in a failure to respect fundamental human rights, and even leads to armed conflicts. Therefore, education for sustainable development seems to be the only way to maintain stability in the world and nature.

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### Abstract

The article refers to the concept of sustainable development, and presents the close relations between the environment, economy and society, and informs the reader that the development of the individual in these three areas should not be at the expense of others. Education for sustainable development, which is mentioned in the article, is a response to the growing environmental crisis, is a conviction that our behaviour needs to change. It popularises critical thinking, shapes active attitudes which favour the environment protection, it also promotes participation of the society in decision-making processes, respect for biodiversity and a holistic picture between man, society and nature.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, environment, economy, society, ecology, education for sustainable development.

### Zrównoważony rozwój „światło w tunelu” współczesnej ekologii

#### Streszczenie

Artykuł odnosi się do koncepcji zrównoważonego rozwoju ukazującego ściśle zależności pomiędzy środowiskiem, gospodarką i społeczeństwem oraz informującego czytelnika o tym, że rozwój jednostki w tych trzech sferach nie powinien odbywać się kosztem innych. Edukacja dla zrównoważonego rozwoju jest odpowiedzią na narastający kryzys śro-

dowiska przyrodniczego, jest przekonaniem o wprowadzeniu zmian w zachowaniu jednostki. Promuje ona krytyczne myślenie, kształtuje aktywne postawy sprzyjające ochronie środowiska, uczestnictwo społeczeństwa w procesach decyzyjnych, poszanowanie biologicznej różnorodności oraz propaguje holistyczny obraz człowieka, społeczeństwa i przyrody.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zrównoważony rozwój, środowisko, gospodarka, społeczeństwo, ekologia, ekorozwój, edukacja dla zrównoważonego rozwoju.