

Joost PLATJE, Anna CZARNECKA,
Agnieszka DEMBICKA, Łukasz NAJGEBAUER,
Diana ROKITA and Andrzej STASIUK
Opole University

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE OPINION OF INHABITANTS OF OPOLE

At the beginning of May 2005, members of the student scientific circle "Sustainable Development" at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Opole, conducted preliminary research on the knowledge of the concept of Sustainable Development among inhabitants of the city of Opole in Poland (about 130,000 inhabitants). The sample of 253 people consisted of university students (84), high school students (78), white collar workers (68) and physical workers (20). The majority of respondents were 18–24 years old, with university students dominating among them (77.27% of the group).

As regards the first question respondents were asked to evaluate the concept of Sustainable Development (see Fig. 1). 131 respondents (almost 52%) answered that sustainable development is very important, 14 people (over 5%) answered that sustainable development is complete nonsense. The largest group who consider sustainable development to be important are white collar workers (69.64%) and physical workers (65%). Despite the fact that a large number of respondents declared that they know the concept of sustainable development, they did not associate it with the correct meaning. The others (108 respondents) did not know the concept of sustainable development at all. This group included 18.51% people with higher education and 36.11% with secondary education. The lack of knowledge on the concept of sustainable development (49 persons) among the other respondents may result from the fact that they are in vocational schools or pursuing their primary education, where this concept is seldom discussed.

The second question aimed at finding out how the respondents got to know the concept of sustainable development. The main source was school (32%). It means that this concept is mainly discussed in educational institutes. A sig-

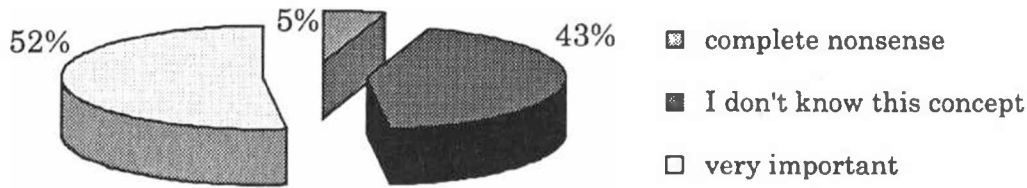


Fig. 1. Knowledge of the concept of Sustainable Development among residents of Opole

nificant group of respondents could not give the source of their knowledge on sustainable development as they did not know what it means at all. Most of the young people have access to new information technologies, but the majority do not use any of these technologies. About 4% of the respondents reported the Internet as a source of information.

University students know the concept of sustainable development the best. A correct definition was given by 41.66% of this group. In their opinion, the term "sustainable development" means "such a growth that satisfies needs of the current generation without exerting any negative influence on the ability of future generations to satisfy their needs". Despite the fact that white collar workers (51.78%) and physical workers (39.74%) think that sustainable development is very important, they interpreted this concept in a different way and connected it with proper human development.

The next question concerned the respondents' attitude to unemployment benefits. The majority of respondents (152) declared that unemployment benefits have a positive influence on society as the unemployed have financial means to satisfy their needs. Many respondents see unemployment benefits as a disincentive for the unemployed to work. This opinion was mostly expressed by high school students, which may suggest that they disapprove of government intervention in the economy.

The following issue was "What is your main source of information about events in your city?" The answers confirmed the hypothesis that most of the respondents find out about city events from local newspapers, which may result from the general availability of this source of information. Only 6 respondents pointed to leaflets as the source of information about events in the city. A lesson for the local government may be that local newspapers are a good medium to inform society about issues of sustainable development.

Regarding the question on the quality of life, 37.6% of the respondents assessed it as average. This group includes most of the university students and white collar workers. For many respondents it was difficult to assess whether their quality of life has changed during the last five years (see Fig. 2), as about 31% answered that "it is hard to say". Almost the same number of respondents answered that the quality of their life has improved (28%) and has not changed during the last five years (28.62%), while only 12% reported a decline. Although the research is preliminary, the results may suggest that,

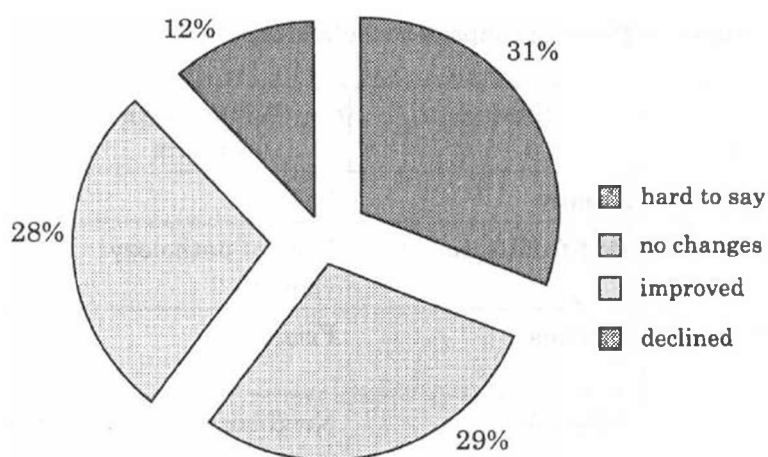


Fig. 2. Assessment of change in quality of life during the last five years

on average, the quality of life has improved. However, this needs more detailed research.

Another issue was the priority of economic, social and environmental factors related to the quality of life (see Table 1). The respondents indicated family (169) and friends (113) as the most important factors. Another important factor is the lack of pathology and violence. For academic students self-fulfillment and education receive high priority.

The location of a large shopping centre was unimportant for many of the respondents (87). Nowadays there is a large supermarket in the centre of the city. Sometimes location of such stores causes resistance among local society and entrepreneurs because they may push small stores out of the market and deform the architecture of the city. These opinions are often not taken into consideration by the local government. Clean water, clean air, nature, recreation and income receive similar priority. An issue for further research is, for example, why income receives higher priority among physical workers compared to the other groups. An explanation may be that many college students and high school students do not have an income themselves, while white collar workers may earn more. Furthermore, there may be a relation between priority of education and self-fulfillment.

With respect to improvement of the quality of life, important factors that were mentioned are effective self-governance and a good local development strategy. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (67.98%) reported that the EU membership has a positive influence on their quality of life.

Concluding, an important issue in our research was the knowledge on the concept of sustainable development among inhabitants of the city of Opole in Poland and issues of their quality of life. An important question is how knowledge on the concept of sustainable development can be increased among local society. An effective method may be introduction of this concept in primary and secondary schools or even earlier. This action may increase ecological

Table 1. Priorities among different groups of stakeholders

No.	High School students	Students	White collar workers	Physical workers
1	Friends	Family	Family	Family
2	Family	Self-fulfillment	Lack of pathology/violence	Lack of pathology/violence
3	Lack of pathology/violence	Friends	Friends	Income
4	Education	Education	Neighborhood's safety	Friends
5	Self-fulfillment	Income	Education	Neighborhood's safety
6	Recreation	Neighborhood's safety	Nature	Everyday healthy food
7	Neighborhood's safety	Clean water and air	Self-fulfillment	Recreation
8	Income	Nature	Recreation	Nature preservation
9	Large supermarket in neighborhood	Green areas	Clean water and air	Clean water and air
10	Clean water and air	Lack of pathology/violence	Income	Self-fulfillment
11	Nature	Recreation	Everyday healthy food	Nature
12	Green areas	Everyday healthy food	Green areas	Green areas
13	Nature preservation	Nature preservation	Nature preservation	Possibility of watching stars in the sky
14	Everyday healthy food	Housing standards	Housing standards	Housing standards
15	Housing standards	Possibility of watching stars in the sky	Possibility of watching stars in the sky	Education
16	Possibility of watching stars in the sky	Car possession	Car possession	Large supermarket in neighborhood
17	Car possession	Large supermarket in neighborhood	Large supermarket in neighborhood	Car possession

consciousness among society. Secondly, an important factor influencing the knowledge on this issue is the local press. Thirdly, local government could organize various campaigns, for example: billboards, media-catchphrases increasing ecological consciousness, mini-conferences, workshops. However, all these actions will not be successful without participation of the local com-

munity. Furthermore, an important condition for spreading knowledge on sustainable development is whether local authorities themselves understand the concept, which is also an issue for further research.

Website

www.poznajmyonz.pl