ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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Abstract

One of key challenges in sustainable development is to find innovative possibilities and new ways of approaching it. The Roman Catholic Church in the Slovak Republic has taken a clear position on the issue of sustainable development, which is based on the compliance with the fundamental moral and spiritual values of Holy Scriptures. In particular, rejection of consumer lifestyle, promotion of mutual trust, solidarity and involvement in environmental protection, can be taken as an indication of awareness of the personal responsibility of humans for their actions. The present paper relies on the results of the empirical research, whose aim was to determine the attitudes of believers to eco-innovation, to perception on the labelling the environment-friendly products and their impact on the shopping decisions.

Keywords: environment, sustainable development, religion, faith, innovation

1. Introduction

In order to prevent further deepening of the negative impact of the global economic crisis, each Member State of the European Union searches for new opportunities and ways to ensure the sustainable development of the European Community. Solving the key issues may be possible with the commitment of the actors of economic market to take into account the creation and implementation of marketing strategies in addition to economic also environmental aspects of its activities, which should be focused on the achievement of so called ‘green growth’ [1]. The green growth represents an integral part of economic growth oriented especially to preservation of natural resources and protection of the environment for future generations.

The problem of the protection of environment currently is one of the most serious societal topics. For example, there is a risky situation in the field of excessive air pollution, rising production of municipal waste or high noise

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pollution. Seizure of land for construction of new residential units and the risk of environmental accidents in most cases has repeatedly threatened the biodiversity of the environment. So the public interest heads towards the restoration of ecological balance and restoration of harmony between human beings and nature.

2. The concept of ‘Sustainable Development of Society’ and the Christian teachings

Rational use of natural resources is becoming a decisive factor in raising the living standards and conditions for the overall development of society [2]. There is an urgent requirement for a radical change in consumer lifestyle, simplification of production processes and renouncing to senseless waste of raw materials. Sustainable development and rational resources exploitation is conditioned by successful strategic changes of existing business processes [3]. The solutions formulated by professionals must be purposeful, comprehensive and systematic.

Finding the universal principles leading to the goal is impossible without the support of the public debate about the nature of goodness in society. It is important the ongoing dialogue between the leaders of the country, the people, the entrepreneurs and the Church. That is to say that from the long term point of view it is not acceptable that the stakeholders constantly maintain high level of profitability in the social environment, despite the presence of serious negative phenomena. Especially in a situation when they are the sole responsible for that negative situation [4]. Therefore, the public invites organizations and individuals to take their appropriate share of responsibility for their actions with regard to the reported undesirable impact on the environment.

In many cases, the need of the change of mindset ultimately requires a redefinition of existing rules or adoption of entirely new tools in order to achieve greater efficiency of human resource management. Despite the fact that economic growth associated with the acquisition of material goods is part of the development of the subject, it can never be itself the sole aim. Subsequently, the basis for social welfare seems to be creating the optimal conditions for the growth of personal qualities of an individual with an emphasis on a dignified and fulfilling life (as well as providing for the future generations). We must learn to accept, evaluate and subsequently use the information in such a way that we protect the unique structure and diversity of natural systems on which the human race depends.

Many religions have identified solutions for the outlined problems that consist primarily in the prevention and correction of existing shortcomings. Christian dogmatists have an interest to draw attention particularly to the truths of faith (Dogma) regarding the creation of the world and man’s relationship to it. It is written in the Old Testament: “God created man in his own image” (Genesis 1.27), “Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it” (Genesis 2.15). Therefore, people usually behave
recklessly to the natural environment, which they should, according to Bible, responsibly manage. However, the world was created by God out of love and for the good of all humankind. Therefore, intentional damage to the environment can be seen not only as a violation of the country laws, but also as a moral issue, a problem of conscience, for all Christians [5]. In addition, it breaches several of God’s commandments. As long as we endanger the health of another person by our reckless actions, we commit the sin against the fifth commandment - thou shalt not kill. The seventh commandment requires respect for the property of others, recognizing the inviolability of somebody else's ownership. This implies that no one has the right to deliberately destroy values that have always been reserved for a common benefit and welfare of the whole society.

3. The position of the Catholic Church to the issue of the relationship between faith and ecology in the Slovak Republic

Since most of Slovak population is statistically reported to be Catholic, the clergy may contribute by forming of Christian opinions which incite to protect the environment.

A good theoretical and methodological basis for solving environmental problems and ensuring sustainable development from the Catholic Church point of view can be considered to be a message of Pope John Paul II, entitled ‘Peace with God the Creator, Peace with every creature’, which was published on the occasion of the World Day of Peace in 1990 [6]. As a result, the Slovak Republic established the Environmental Subcommittee at the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia (within the Theological Commission), whose aim is to build and raise awareness of environmental responsibility among believers. So far, the committee has published a number of scientific publications with regard to the regeneration process and the preservation of natural life. Many of them are meant especially for teachers of religious education in primary and secondary schools. In addition to the education of priests, religious officials and other public bodies, the Environmental Subcommittee helps to compile official statements of Catholic Church to the relevant issues.

The urgency of environmental education is proclaimed by the pastoral letter of Slovak Bishops on the subject of faith and sustainable development of society. The pastoral letter publicized the opinions of the Slovak Bishops Conference on the issues of animal suffering or the challenge of responsible approach of worshipers to waste management. Through the initiative ‘The Green for Christianity of the Third Millennium’, the Slovak clergymen have lately strived to promote programs (practical steps and recommendations) aimed at preventing negative impacts on the environment. For Christians, it subsequently comes to the fore the uneasy task of creation an optimal relation between admissible limit of immediate consumption and long-term consumption of ecological materials. The Catholic Church wants to guide and motivate in particular young people to reconsider their existing lifestyle and reflect on the thoughtless wasting of natural resources.
4. Consideration of environmental aspect of sustainable development by Christians in the Slovak Republic

The present output is the result of the empirical research conducted in the first quarter of 2013. It consisted of a questionnaire and 937 structured interviews conducted in order to find relevant data regarding the relationship between consumers’ shopping behaviour and the current offer of ‘green’ products on the market. The research statistical sample was formed only by respondents who identified themselves as being Roman Catholic, randomly selected. In summary, 452 questionnaires were distributed among the believers, throughout the Slovak Republic. The total return of completed questionnaires was 86.3%. The achieved percentage of return may be considered unusually high, so the data collection as successful.

In the final processing and evaluating of the survey results, there were finally included all 390 returned questionnaires. This was possible because of the responsible approach of all who participated in this empirical research, as well as because of their willingness to fill in this questionnaire in the right and responsible way. An important contribution to the smooth running of empirical research had the interview operator, who provided additional information to interested parties, in particular in relation to the criteria of inclusion into the sample, filling in rules or the use of the data. With regard to the gender segregation of respondents, it may be noted that the research was attended by 58% of women and 42% of men, especially of active population. At the same time, they were believers in the age range from 15 to 62 years, who were expected to participate in public life and have adequate financial resources to engage in the surveyed activities.

The Christian beliefs are clearly connected the individual’s ability to take responsibility for acts performed in an environment where he/she lives. Therefore, we were interested in our survey in the opinions of believers regarding the purchase of environment-friendly goods, the manufacturing process or the proposed procedure of consumption. The so called ‘level of engagement’, respectively the consumer’s interest in environmental friendly products, has reached a limit of 72% of respondents. Another 18% of respondents were not able to take a clear position on that question. We believe that due to the deteriorating climatic conditions affecting the quality of life Christians are encouraged to change the economic behaviour on the market. People are beginning to increasingly worry about the return of their funds, as well as public finance management. A positive finding is that almost 85% of respondents expected from Slovak producers and sellers of goods an active environmental policy.

In practice, unfortunately, businesses often do not care about the quality and origin of products offer to the customers on the shelves of their stores. Consumers themselves often do not know how to recognize whether it is a true ecological product. More than half of respondents (57%) do not know or have not met yet with an environmental label on the product. In the Slovak Republic,
the labelling of ecological products have also been long done through a national eco-label ‘Environmentally Friendly Product’, in addition, the applicant has an opportunity to obtain the European marking ‘The EU Eco-label’ (known as ‘the Flower’) [7].

Among manufacturers there are also popular other certification systems with a special focus, such as national and European label for plant and animal products produced in ecological agriculture (the so-called ‘organic products and organic food’). The research also pointed on the relatively strong dissatisfaction of respondents (66%) with the location and amount of information available on the packaging of product that should emphasize the respectful treatment of the environment in their production and consumption. In particular, older consumers often do not understand the austere graphic indication (without any explanation), and therefore they do not pay special attention to this group of products.

A basic precondition for the successful mastering of this deficiency is to raise public awareness. Social communication through the media is significantly involved in shaping the value system. Only 5% of respondents think that the media in Slovakia sufficiently present environment-friendly products. 24 % of respondents did not know how to answer this question. We must realize that the role of the mass media is only to present the advertising message to the potential customer [8]. The very structure of the advertising message depends on the outlined requirements of the producer of the goods and on the creative strategy of the advertiser. Unfortunately, advertising regularly favours the promotion of the goods associated with the display of relatively unrealistic visions of life with a view to an immediate increase in sales volume. Such a conception rarely brings positive change. The results of the survey also showed that more than three quarters of respondents (78%) are willingly prepared to educate themselves on environmental issues and want to acquire new knowledge from the fundamental principles of rational use of natural resources to reducing consumption. More broadly, it is about developing and understanding necessary transition to sustainable development of society, which allows continuous monitoring of interactivity and dynamics in the relationship between human being and nature. It is important to find a mechanism that integrates not only the prescribed minimum on the label of the ecological products or recommended procedure of consumption, but that would provide the space also to people for sharing their individual experiences, interesting ideas and good advice when using the purchased goods. It is well known that when the public participates in any project, it increases the likelihood of positive acceptance and acceptance among believers.

When assessing the current state and development of sustainable development in the Slovak Republic we must also keep in mind that the final shopping decision of an individual is affected by several factors, at the same time. We can only guess the reasons why consumers prefer one product to another. However, we believe that especially the undesirable consequences of the global economic crisis are the cause of their much greater alertness and prudence when entering into business relationships. It is understandable that
because of an ongoing unfavourable social situation many people primary seek refuge in acquisition of an economic benefit. According to our findings, an average Slovak with an average salary, when selecting the goods in the store, pays attention primarily to product price (74%), subsequently to brand of the product, which corresponds to the subjective perception of quality (46%) and only later to other characteristics, such as operating costs (40%), the material used for the manufacture of products (18%) or the possibility for ecological treatment of waste (14%), etc. Previous arguments regarding the affinity of consumers to ecological products and green innovations are unfortunately finally getting discarded by measures of lowering the daily expenses. Change can be expected only in the case if in the next years will improve the overall living standards of the population.

5. Conclusions

Reflections on acceptable solutions to the problems related to environmental protection has long been not only within the ecology, but also have been dealt within Theology, Philosophy, Economics or Law. Understanding the interdependence of human progress with existing resource constraints of our planet is becoming a standard belonging to general education and the maturity of any nation. The human beings must rediscover the ‘lost’ respect for nature, which has over the years considerably fallen under the influence of their selfishness and arrogance. The Church has as well the opportunity to promote environmental awareness and sensibility of believers in developing their hierarchy of values in terms of connecting the faith with a sustainable development of society. Knowing the relevant connections contributes to the re-assessment of planned interventions in the natural environment as well as to the prevention of disruption of its equilibrium.

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References

Environmental protection and sustainable development in the Slovak Republic