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ORIGINAL PAPER

Environmental Protection - a New Dimension of Economic Growth and Development in the European Union

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Abstract:
Contemporary economic and social development are closely linked to the phenomenon of globalization of the world economy, which causes many of the old everyday economic and social processes to influence each other. Today, more than ever, the ecological interference of global interdependencies affects all states of the world. The global and cross-border nature of environmental issues also affect the countries of the European Union. The desire of the world's states to take action and make sacrifices to improve the environment has grown considerably in recent decades as the damage to the environment from human activity has become increasingly severe. As the environment influences the quality of life of EU citizens, the EU is expected to play an active role in protecting and conserving the environment, both internally, in Community law and externally, through the EU's participation in international agreements in this field.

Keywords: *economic growth; sustainable development; environment protection; climate change; natural resources.*

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Introduction

Resource depletion, pollution are environmental issues that have given rise to the idea that environmental protection is an integral part of development. Natural resources are a component part of economic resources, considered by Solow a cake to be shared between generations (Solow R.M., 1974: 29-46). His idea is continued, if our successors will receive a smaller stock, they must compensate with a larger one of scientific knowledge (Gradinaru I., 2000: 50).

The European Community has synthesized the worst environmental problems: climate change, air pollution, water pollution, man-made disasters, the use of chemicals in consumer products and the use of genetically modified organisms in agriculture (Profiroiu M. 2008: 335).

Environmental protection is an incentive for innovation and not an obstacle to economic performance. That is why it is considered necessary to give priority to the environment before economic competitiveness, and the economic and social progress of countries can be assessed and measured not only by economic and social indicators, but also by environmental indicators (Avram, 2007: 70-73).

A nation develops if it benefits from economic, human, ecological and social capital. Achieving these dimensions implies accepting the limited nature of natural resources (mentioned in the reports of the Club of Rome, the Bruthland Report) and conserving them. Another element that must be accepted is given by the ephemeral existence of man, future generations must develop on the same planet. If natural capital were depleted, if environmental factors were polluted, what life would there be on Earth? Therefore, a restrictive and solid environmental policy is required, but also ensuring coherence between the three components of sustainable development: economic growth, social cohesion, environmental protection.

Environmental protection must be understood as both a European and an international challenge. Environmental problems will have to be solved effectively through the action of all countries, because pollution does not depend on national borders. Climate change, the depletion of the ozone layer, the extinction of various species of wild fauna, melting glaciers, pollution of seas and oceans are realities that draw attention to the need for common measures globally and implicitly in Europe (Pirvu et al., 2011: 225-230).

Interdependencies between countries in the field of environmental protection have led to the conclusion of a large number of international agreements and conventions that should allow for strict monitoring and resolution of environmental issues. At the international level, there are two problems: on the one hand, it is more difficult and takes longer to reach compromises on the part of the participants, and on the other hand, there are difficulties in verifying compliance with commitments and in applying sanctions. However, the globalization of environmental problems shows us that, now and in the future, problems can only be solved internationally, which is in fact the only viable solution.

Environmental Protection - Support for Economic Growth and Development

Homo sapiens, which for millennia has built a civilization with all its values and shortcomings, but which respects itself, has become a homo economicus in recent centuries and, with the transition from industrial society to the technological age, seems to become a frightening speed "homo catastrophicus". Its moral responsibility, which has

been diluted with civil liability, becomes insufficient when the fate of the planet and future generations is at stake. A new type of ethical responsibility becomes necessary because the rationality of science, which intervenes brutally in the field of nature, can overturn not only the natural order of natural phenomena but also the fate of mankind (Jonas, H.:174). For a long time, the industrial society, in the machinist tradition of the 19th century, considered that nature is an inexhaustible reservoir of resources and a garbage can for the waste of exploitation of these resources in the service of progress. The twentieth century continued this tradition to which unimaginable means of destruction were added through military technique. It was necessary for the goal of quantitative growth to reach a critical mass and for human consciousness to realize its own capacity for self-destruction in order for something to begin to change. But change is quite slow and problematic. If initially economic growth was based more on renewable resources or on the unlimited capacity of the natural environment to self-purify, over time human activity has outpaced the ability to regenerate nature, contradicting the natural cycles favorable to economic and biological life (Ionescu G.H., 2020: 3).

In an attempt to define the concept of economic growth, P.A. Samuelson points out that "it is a multifaceted process, in which various elements and dimensions of the most different are combined infinitely" (Samuelson P.A.,1968: 931). This concept has known a continuous evolution, going from the analysis of macroeconomic problems to the elaboration of economic-mathematical models in the '60s, so that in the' 70s, to highlight a series of global analyzes initiated by bodies such as: International Monetary Fund (IMF), Rome Club, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Reality has shown that economic growth involves structural changes, marking the transition from one stage of development to another (Pirvu, Gruescu, Nanu, 2009: 3). In this sense, a complex and extremely important problem facing both developing countries development, as well as industrialized ones, is related to the answer to the question of whether economic growth (increase in gross domestic product-GDP per capita) can be sustained without harming the environment? This problem has been addressed with the help of the concept of sustainable development. In the evaluation of the growth of the gross national product there is an increasing need to take into account new variables, such as: population, natural resources, current material flows between production and the natural environment and polluting residues. Also justified not only quantitative influences but also the qualitative ones deriving from the fragility of the natural environment, in terms of attracted resources, but also of the capacity and its assimilation and neutralization of polluting residues. The emergence of new restrictions, generated by the issue of natural resources has led to the shaping of a type of economic growth, whose concept aims at profound changes in economic strategy.

The economic growth so far has been achieved as a growth based on the idea of obtaining maximum profit and ignoring the external costs of development (Pirvu, Gruescu, 2009: 8). As reality has shown, economic growth cannot avoid pollution, but all the effects of social production must be taken into account, so that improving the quality of life is no longer incompatible with maintaining a natural balance. The integrated accounting system (which captures both components: economic and ecological) must measure both goods and services traded on the market and changes in natural resource reserves. For example, if a natural resource is being depleted due to exports, the accounting results show an apparent increase in wealth, even if in reality the raw material base can only be rebuilt, and the environment is degraded. This fact will

have to be corrected in the future, so that if a country's resource base is diminished, it should be reflected in national accounts.

Economic growth and development must not be opposed to the environment but adapted to the laws of nature, by achieving the economic-social-ecological optimum. This involves maximizing the attraction and efficient use of the company's main resources; allocation of these resources based on market mechanisms; maximizing material and spiritual well-being by diversifying and streamlining consumption, maintaining ecological balance. These criteria of the economic-social-ecological optimum must be completed with new criteria resulting from the need for economic growth in the conditions of environmental protection. Thus, we can mention some such criteria (Giarini, Sthael, 1996: 117-122).

a. The criterion of minimizing the amount of natural resources incorporated per product unit. This criterion imposes qualitative and quantitative restrictions on the economic efficiency of attracting and using natural resources. In general, the attraction of resources takes place in the descending order of their efficiency and as a result, the same amount of utilities is obtained by using a larger volume of factors of production;

b. The criterion of proper conservation of natural resources. Maintaining economic growth without deteriorating working conditions means rebalancing the ratio between the quantity extracted from nature and the quantity included in the goods produced at different stages of processing.

c. The criterion of energy intensity of national production and minimization of anti-pollution costs, which measures how many units of energy are used to obtain a quantity of national product or national income;

d. The criterion of recyclability and post-consumer recoverability, aims at anticipating the capitalization of the useful material from the physical body of the material goods after their removal from use, both as means of production and as consumer goods;

e. The biodegradability criterion considers the decomposition without harmful effects of any good material taken out of use or thrown in nature;

f. The criterion for optimizing anti-pollution costs is set more as they appear as production costs included in the company's costs. Assuming that these costs are necessary, the company must establish their optimal level in comparison with the savings and benefits obtained by each polluting unit that undertakes anti - pollution measures, as well as at the macroeconomic level;

g. The criterion of increasing the material and spiritual well-being, in the conditions of the contemporary economic growth, which supposes the increase of the national income per inhabitant, the increase of the quantity of goods and services necessary to satisfy the needs;

h. The criterion of ecological responsibility in all spheres of productive and unproductive activity.

Against the background of the worrying decrease of natural resources, in order to ensure the continuity of life on Earth, the environmental services provided by natural systems are of maximum importance, from the regulation of the hydrological cycle with the help of forests, to the filtration of pollutants. Therefore, through environmental policy it is necessary to promote pro-nature laws in parallel with an anticipatory policy for the future. Economic growth in the conditions of natural environment protection is marked by the efforts made by society to avoid the degradation of nature. Simultaneously with the achievement of economic growth, there is a tendency to

increase the external costs that must be born primarily by the one who generated the degradation of the natural environment.

On the other hand, the dynamics of economic growth must not only consider the market competitiveness, quality and technical level, but also allow its use without generating polluting effects (Pîrvu R. et al., 2019b: 5). Herman Daly, Senior Economist in the World Bank's Department of Environment, who focused on economics, ethics, and the environment, said that "There is no point of contact between macroeconomics and the environment" (Daly H. 1999:25). If we consider the most important indicator for measuring the economic achievements of a country - the gross national product (GNP), we observe that in its calculation natural resources are not depreciated by exploitation, while buildings, machinery, equipment.

Suggestions for changing the calculation of some economic indicators are still modest. Thus, both the beneficial products and the harmful outputs of any process should be measured and the changes in each category should be monitored before quantifying the changes in productivity. A simple example would be a power plant that, in addition to kilowatt-hours of electricity, also produces air pollution. It is quite easy to assess the significance of electricity because it is sold. But it is also possible to assess at least part of the economic significance of atmospheric emissions, given that sulfur oxides cause losses in windward crops to the power plant, affecting the health of the population leading to payment for the treatment of respiratory diseases, all this involving costs that are not found in any indicator of economic progress.

In this regard, some economists have revolted against current conceptions of GNP, considering that this indicator would not consider aspects related to environmental degradation, or depletion of non-renewable resources. As a result, voices have emerged proposing several corrections to this indicator. Swedish economist and politician Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987), winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics (1974) is one of those who militates to take into account when calculating this indicator two elements: the costs needed to stop or slow down growth pollution, respectively the costs of stopping the depletion of non-renewable resources or to find replacements (Gala, P. at al, 2018: 219-236).

Given the evolution of economic growth, there are factors with reverse influence, which involve additional investment costs, such as: switching to the exploitation of deposits with low contents of useful substances or located in extraction conditions, recovery and capitalization of reusable resources, environmental protection and its improvement.

There is an indissoluble link between economic growth and the environment with an accentuated character of reciprocity if the economic process will involve human intervention on nature. In recent decades, the spread of various anthropogenic processes has led to a real environmental crisis, expressed by an antagonism between human society and nature seen as separate systems, with their own laws and rhythms of development, inconsistencies in quantifying economic and ecological phenomena.

Environmental policy, being one of the most complex Community policies, mainly due to its cross-sectoral nature and direct interference with economic growth, faces a set of specific problems. They often stem from an attempt to balance economic and environmental interests and turn them from conflicting interests into complementary interests. This creates situations in which false problems arise, but which are in fact beneficial effects of Community environmental policy. Such an example is given by the relationship between economic growth - the reduction of the quality of environmental

factors or the reduction of natural resources and which creates tensions and resistance in the application or adoption of environmental protection measures (Pirvu G. et al., 2007: 277-298)

This is precisely because of the fear of supporting the environment, at the cost of economic decline and the creation of social crises - given the maximum nature of consumer production. Achieving economic growth will always be conditioned by environmental factors. This subordination of the Community 's involvement in the field of the environment to economic objectives has led to the ineffectiveness of the measures adopted and to difficulties in reconciling economic and environmental objectives, with delays in the adoption of a sectoral Community policy.

In this regard academician N.N. Constantinescu (1984: 14) showed that concrete work is carried out on the value of using natural elements external to the production of the kind of goods considered, while abstract work creates a value that does not replace any value of the natural environment, but increases the value of goods produced, because without such an expense its production would not have needed to take place.

If we look at natural resources from an economic point of view, they can be grouped into two main categories: the first is represented by natural wealth in the form of working tools (minerals, fuels, wind, hydraulic, solar, electric, nuclear, steam, etc.); the second, information, which began to enjoy increasing attention as its mode of use was discovered, and is now gaining decisive importance.

Several measures are needed to ensure the convergence of economic, social and political objectives, such as:

- regulation of a system of economic instruments to ensure the integration of social and environmental protection objectives in economic policies (prices, property rights, taxes, negotiable emission rights, subsidies, negotiable agreements);
- reconsideration of the decision-making process, in order to allow a wide participation of the civil society and of the decision-makers at various levels;
- creating and developing an information system on the consequences of certain policies and actions in order to facilitate the reversal of current, non-sustainable trends;
- development of markets for public goods and ecological goods and services;
- developing research in the direction of technologies, using fewer natural resources, less polluting, with reduced risks for the environment and for the individual;
- the development of an education and training / communication system that would create the premises for a social dialogue, a transparent decision-making process under the conditions of an individual and collective responsibility and an evolution towards sustainability in consumption and production behaviours;
- horizontal application of sustainability criteria on all economic policies;
- the development of a system of indicators that would allow a regular, efficient evaluation of the sustainability of policies and actions.

Sustainability in European Policies

In European policies, the correlation of the environment with economic dynamics and social cohesion in such a long-term vision has gradually taken place, the decisive moment being the Treaty of Amsterdam. Since then, in developing environmental strategies, various specific programs or complementary and in their application, the key principle has become that of integration. However, the application of the principle was not consistent until the Sixth Environment Action Program (EAP)

and the adoption in 2001 by the Gothenburg European Council of the "EU Sustainable Development Strategy" which confirmed, probably for the next decades, of community action: the environment, as the third pillar alongside the economic and social one.

As economic development takes place within ecological systems, there is an increasing talk of eco-development as a complex relationship between economic development and the natural environment. The technical-scientific progress has registered such performances that, in order to achieve its essential objectives, man has transformed his natural environment with great concern, so that the irrational exploitation of nature will have, in addition to the expected beneficial effects on general well-being, adverse consequences on ecological balance.

The ecological dimension of economic growth and development was realized relatively late for several reasons, the most important of which are:

• the existence, for a rather long period, of a false, mechanistic conception, of attributing the exclusive and determining role in the evolution of the national wealth to some factors with immediate quantitative action (financial resources), neglecting or minimizing the qualitative influence of duration of environmental conditions;

• the slower, more perceptible, and apparently less dangerous nature of the ecological imbalance and environmental degradation compared to the problem of armaments or economic gaps in the world, hunger and poverty, lack of health care, etc., which have attracted the attention of world public opinion more quickly, although all these phenomena involve, more or less, environmental disturbances;

• the appearance of a contradiction between the concept of economic development and the environmental one within some economic theories circulated until a few years ago. Currently, the attitude towards this issue has evolved, appreciating that these two concepts are not only not antagonistic, but can coexist, allowing mutual support and stimulation.

Over the years, EU bodies have drafted hundreds of environmental directives, with companies criticizing the close correlation between the level of stringency of regulations and the costs of adaptation affecting companies. Environmental protection mechanisms are at a stage of complexity that diminishes marginal profits, leading to reluctance on the part of companies to finance them. An assessment of the environmental impact of the Internal Single Market highlights several positive results, but also negative results, which occur as a result of boosting economic growth that generates waste. The competitive pressures generated, but also a series of microeconomic effects in terms of efficiency will determine performance in the use of labor and capital, and the pace of investment in eco - industries is expected to increase. The Single Internal Market also plays a central role in the spread of new green technologies on a European scale. It would be unrealistic to believe that society as a whole will accept a lower standard of living only to improve the quality of the environment.

Another false problem is connected to the previous one and refers to the enlargement process of the European Union and its high cost when environmental issues are involved. This is because, as the Commission documents show, environmental protection in Central and Eastern European countries is underdeveloped compared to previous enlargements, and the cost of alignment with Community standards is shown to be very high. What is not as obvious, however, are the advantages that flow from here, both in environmental and economic terms.

Thus, in environmental terms it should be noted that raising environmental protection standards in these countries can only have beneficial effects at European and global level and will lead to an improvement in the overall environmental situation, with visible long-term effects. From an economic point of view, the alignment of the industries of these countries with the Community environmental standards implies the massive refurbishment of factories and plants and contributes to the development of the Community production market for such technologies and equipment - hence supporting economic growth at Community level. However, these are general and forward-looking issues. Along with them there are concrete problems, specific to the adoption or implementation of certain community environmental protection measures, but which are nevertheless subordinated to the previously mentioned problems.

Member States have failed to implement this directive and measures have been identified to avoid this evaluation by certain projects (such as structuring a major project into several small projects). Obviously, this situation is the result of a lack of effective weighting of short-term economic effects with long-term environmental effects - and even economic, effects, as we have shown before. Based on these conclusions, the European Commission has established four organizational principles on which to base future initiatives in the field of environmental protection, namely: predictability, integration, flexibility, optimal cost-effect ratio.

The principle of predictability makes it possible for companies to anticipate actions and as such to adapt to them by cultivating a long-term approach. In order to obtain the best possible results in an individual field, an effective mix of tools is used by virtue of the integration principle and sectoral policies that involve a synergistic combination with other areas of the integration process. The principle of flexibility allows business circles to implement the rigor of environmental policy in an efficient manner. According to the principle of the optimal cost-effect ratio, the least expensive optimal solutions should be preferred, provided that the ecological integrity is not affected.

Thus, if we take into account that the activity of environmental protection not only does not endanger but even maintains at an appropriate level the quality of factors of production and thus ensures the functionality of economic flows, satisfying a larger volume of needs with the same amount of utilities, less consumption of time or resources, we also have the size of its involvement in the complex of the national economy.

For the integration of the environment-development relationship at political level, Agenda 21 advocates for the improvement of the decision-making process by:

• integration of economic, ecological and social considerations at all decision-making levels;

• ensuring the transparency and reflection in the national accounting of the effects that the actions of different economic policies have on the environment;

• ensuring access to information at all structural levels;

• improving environmental management strategies and systems, including through the use of environmental impact studies.

Since 1973, the Commission has launched multi-annual environmental action programs (MAPs), setting out future legislative proposals and future objectives for EU environmental policy. In 2013, the Council and Parliament adopted the Seventh WFP for the period up to 2020, entitled "A good life, within the limits of our planet." Building on a number of strategic initiatives, the program sets out nine priority objectives, including:

nature protection, increased ecological resilience, sustainable, resource-efficient and low-carbon growth, and combating environmental health threats. The program also emphasizes the need for better enforcement of EU environmental legislation, cutting-edge scientific knowledge, investment and the integration of environmental issues into other policies.

In 2001, the EU introduced its Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS), complementing the Lisbon Strategy previously adopted to promote growth and jobs with an environmental dimension. In line with these objectives, the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, EUROPE 2020, 2010) for economic growth aims at "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth". Under the auspices of this strategy, the "Resource Efficient Europe" flagship initiative is paving the way for sustainable growth and supporting the transition to a resource-efficient and low-carbon economy. In addition, in 2011, the EU committed itself to tackling the decline of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services by 2020 (European Commission, Biodiversity strategy for 2030).

The EU has a key role to play in international environmental negotiations. The EU is a party to many global, regional, or sub-regional environmental agreements that address a wide range of issues, including nature protection and biodiversity, climate change and transboundary air or water pollution. At the Tenth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Nagoya, Japan, in 2010, the EU made a major contribution to establishing an agreement on a comprehensive strategy to halt biodiversity loss by 2020. contributed to the development of several major international agreements adopted in 2015 at the UN level, such as the 2030 Agenda (United Nation, 2015) for sustainable development [which includes the 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets], The Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. At the same time, the Union became a party to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Practice has shown that economic development is a major cause of environmental degradation, so by virtue of the principle of sustainable development it is necessary to reconcile the goal of increasing competitiveness with that of environmental protection. A sound environmental policy has restrictive implications and costs for competitiveness. The internationalization of economies raises several requirements in external cooperation relations and sustainability must become a catalyst for economic action and public opinion to promote new structural, institutional reforms and changes in production and consumption behaviors. To achieve this goal, coherence should first be ensured between the three coordinates - economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection - seen as contradictory options, given that social cohesion involves a policy of income redistribution, which limits the sources of growth, in turn, environmental protection involves the adoption of restrictive measures regarding the use of natural resources and technologies, producing distortions in the allocation of factors on criteria of economic efficiency.

Reconciling these coordinates of sustainable development would mean economic growth ensuring the premises of social progress and environmental protection; a stimulating social policy for economic growth; an environmental policy focused on market economy-specific instruments, at the same time effective and economical. Trying to lay the foundations for a mutually positive correlation between industrial competitiveness and environmental protection, the European Commission said: "Overall, exploiting a positive synergy between industrial competitiveness and environmental

protection is increasingly seen as the introduction of clean industrial processes, preferably trying to identify and fix what has been damaged. This attitude responds much better to the requirements of industrial competitiveness by providing a foundation for the basic factors of competitiveness instead of temporary advantages". (European Commission, 1986).

The key to unleashing the power of national governments towards balancing the environmental protection relationship - economic growth is represented by organizations that promote sustainable development at all levels. If this type of organization proliferates, laying the foundations of a coalition with government structures, then it will be possible to really talk about the existence of a force strong and convincing enough to be able to slow down or even stop activities with a negative impact on the environment.

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