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Sustainable development and the influence of social values A case study on Romania

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Abstract

In the light of the major ethical principles underlying the theory of sustainable development, economists no longer regard man strictly as “homo oeconomicus”, motivated only by his economic rationality; he is nowadays the creator and the beneficiary of the potential sustainable development, but not alone, but together with his generation and in the benefit of future generations as well. This means a paradigm shift with humanistic accents, which makes necessary an interdisciplinary approach to the economic issues. In the last century, emphasizing and validating individualism from an ethical point of view, but also under the influence of other global factors, there were some important changes regarding moral values. In post-communist Romania, social and cultural values are the product and the expression of globalization, but also the result of the collective consciousness, continuously subject to change. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the situation in Romania in terms of social values, and in terms of education and to argue the need for moral education designed to contribute to a human and intellectual capital that meets the imperious needs of the sustainable development.

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1. Sustainable development – an ethical, humanistic concept, a priority for the nations worldwide

The concept of sustainable development is both normative and teleological, containing the road ahead, the line forces and the noble purpose as well. Thus, human beings, so complex and also so different, must act, individually

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and collectively (as organizations, social groups, states, unions of states) according to a set of moral values and principles in order to live a good life, to grow, and to preserve de Planet.

The 27 principles contained in The Rio Declaration (United Nations, 1992) were based on a set of moral values that should animate people to achieve sustainable development objectives. Among these we mention the most obvious, without establishing a hierarchy, as follows: solidarity within the present generation, but also with future generations, respect for life and for the natural environment, for tradition and national identity, responsibility, justice, honesty, creativity, courage, empathy, trust. “Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.” (United Nations, 1992)

Individual's welfare is the purpose, the reason for designing sustainable development based on universal moral principles – in this way the economy must function according to a new, humanistic frame. Economics nowadays is not discussing only about profit, markets, prices, producers and consumers. Homo oeconomicus has to become more human, his action must be motivated by a more complex rationality than merely economic rationality – getting the maximum personal satisfaction using scarce resources. He must act morally in the economy and in the society, in order to achieve a real sustainable development. His welfare is the goal, the core of the development, but he is not seen alone, his wellbeing and his actions are connected and interrelated with the wellbeing and the actions of people around him. Quality human capital and social capital are needed - the individual, a conscious and active member of his generation, ought to be morally intelligent.

22 years have passed since The Rio Conference. The goals established by the Convention on Climate Change, Agenda 21 and the Convention on Biological Diversity were evaluated several times, recently in 2012, at the Earth Summit 2012, Rio+20. The objectives of sustainability and the concrete actions for reaching these objectives were renewed on this occasion in an outcome document entitled “The future we want” (United Nations, 2012): “We recognize that the younger generations are the custodians of the future, as well as the need for better quality and access to education beyond the primary level. We therefore resolve to improve the capacity of our education systems to prepare people to pursue sustainable development [...]” (United Nations, 2012).

In the meanwhile, in 2007-2008, the financial, economic and social crises started and there were more and more questions among scholars: Which were the causes of the crises? What should be done?

Economics seemed to need a serious reevaluation. The Stiglitz Report (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, et al., 2009) recommended a new paradigm of economic development, which involved a series of bold changes on policies and institutional development; they recognize the need to invest in human resources and human capital. On the other hand, “The Commission believes that a global debate around the issues and recommendations raised in this report provides an important venue for a discussion of societal values, for what we, as a society, care about, and whether we are really striving for what is important.” (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, et al., 2009)

In addition, the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010) sets out three priorities for the EU in the near future: smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The concept of sustainable development was conceived and designed as a result of environmental shortcomings caused by economic development at any cost. The alarming degree of pollution of the Earth has created the need for corporate responsibility and calls the nations to stop the environmental disasters before they become irreversible. At theoretical level the profit is set on the second place, as scholars and politicians have started to understand that there can be no real and healthy development otherwise than one that considers environmental protection. Further, the initiators of the ethical concept of sustainable development have understood that development means in fact human welfare, and this is not reduced to material wellbeing, but has many other sides including social justice and equity. The moral values and principles of sustainable development refer to three aspects: economic, social and environmental, interconnected in a future plan to improve the present state of the world.

2. Human capital, social capital, corruption and development in Romania

The economic development of a nation depends on the state of the human capital, as the defining part of the intellectual capital. The Human Capital Index is relevant in this regard. On the other hand, corruption, as a measure of morality, also influences development. The human capital is also influenced by the morality, as it contains the human values.

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