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Adriana Merta-Staszczak
Wroclaw University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Management
e-mail: adriana.merta-staszczak@pwr.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-2692-1057

Katarzyna Walecka-Jankowska
Wroclaw University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Management
e-mail: katarzyna.walecka-jankowska@pwr.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-2764-6763

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES OF BUSINESSES

Abstract. The article refers to a valid and current research area related to business sustainability. The development of the concept of sustainability has resulted in the linking of the overall concept to the actions that entrepreneurs take for sustainable development. Thus, it has moved the discussion to the level of sustainable business models, taking into account economic, environmental and social aspects together. The paper focuses on the social layer of the sustainable business model. The main objective of this article is to identify the relationship between activities in the social dimension and sustainable outcomes. Research covers organizations operating in Poland and is based on a questionnaire (the statistical analysis is based on empirical studies conducted in 303 companies operating in Poland). The data collected allowed the construction of a regression model and the results revealed statistically significant relationships between social outcomes and values for society and employees.

Keywords: management, sustainability, triple bottom line, social dimension, outcomes.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, organizations operate within a globalized world characterized by increasingly frequent and turbulent changes. In this context, where the boundaries between societies become more fluid, the role of organizations in shaping well-being is invaluable. The actions undertaken by organizations impact not only their direct stakeholders but also society at large. Understanding the relationship between stakeholders and the organization in the social domain, as well as its influence on sustainable organizational outcomes, allows for a deeper comprehension of the tangible effects an organization has on its environment and how it can be shaped to effectively achieve sustainable goals. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize how activities in the social sphere translate into various aspects of social life. This includes examining how ethical actions can support employees on one hand, and on the other, how to mitigate negative impacts on stakeholders while enhancing positive ones. Identifying the most critical areas in this matter is pivotal. This discussion aims not only to focus on the significance of sustainable development but also to highlight that social domain activities can be a strategic investment yielding benefits for the organization itself (e.g., financial, reputational, serving as a clear signal to potential partners, investors, or customers) as well as its stakeholders.

2. Concept of sustainable development

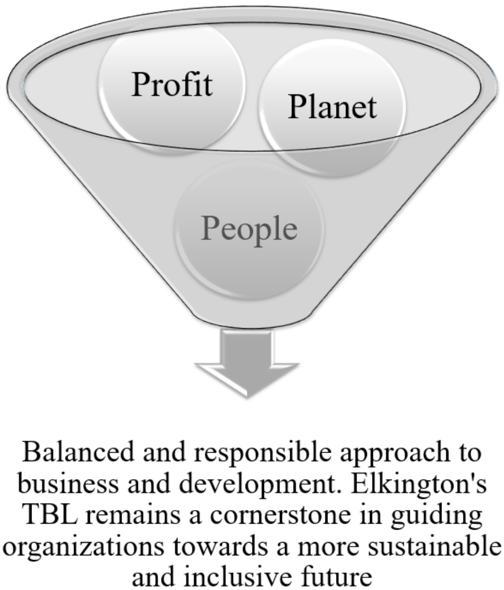
The integration of environmental considerations into economic development strategies, initially recognized at the 1965 Second Governing Session of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), has evolved to emphasize eco-friendly production, efficient waste management, and intergenerational equity. This approach underscores the necessity of harmonizing economic strategies with environmental protection. The landmark 1987 "Brundtland Report" and subsequent 1992 "Agenda 21" from the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit further delineated sustainable development, advocating for a balance across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development in 1993, the adoption of the Johannesburg Implementation Plan in 2002, and the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals in 2001 marked significant milestones in global efforts toward sustainability. The UN's 2015 adoption of the "Transforming Our World: Agenda for Sustainable Development – 2030" with its 17 goals represents a comprehensive global commitment to sustainable development, echoed by the EU's "Europe 2020" strategy, emphasizing smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2016, 324). In Poland, the transition towards sustainable development began post-World War II, gaining momentum with the political changes of the 1990s. The enactment of the National Environmental Policy in 1990, the inclusion of sustainable development in the 1997 Constitution, and the adoption of the "Poland 2025: Long-term Strategy for Sustainable and Balanced Development" in 2000 were pivotal. Despite gradual progress, environmental concerns remained underappreciated until Poland's EU accession, which catalyzed the adoption of comprehensive national and regional environmental strategies (Śleziak, 2016, 45).

The acceptance of international strategies has streamlined the introduction of new activities aimed at sustainability at the enterprise level. One of the definitions of sustainability in business is the ability of an enterprise to continuously learn, adapt and grow, revitalize, reconstruct, and reorient to maintain a high position in the market (Grudzewski, Hejduk, Sankowska, Wańtuchowicz, 2010, 27). However, in order for the value of the enterprise to be sustained and sustainable, there must also be a system of strategic management which leads to the implementation of three interrelated directions: environmental, economic and social (Jabłoński, 2010, 22). Their goal is to improve the living conditions of the population (including the organization's stakeholders) and economic development while preserving the environment and the rational use of resources. Different types of organizational improvements, including those focused on new ideas, products and processes, can foster sustainable results (Walecka-Jankowska, Mrzygłocka-Chojnacka 2023a, 99–112; Walecka-Jankowska, Mrzygłocka-Chojnacka, 2023b, 577–593). Moreover, as Bansal et al. (2023) point out, businesses are building more sustainable states through their social activities. The common denominator here is the acceptance of responsibility for activities, the introduction of innovations, the rational use of resources, the reduction of the production of harmful substances, the increase in the level of working conditions, and the maintenance of proper (ethical) relations with the environment (Misztal, 2019, 37). The search for and introduction of management methods based on these paradigms is part of the need to achieve competitive advantage, but also to take into account the needs and expectations of stakeholders. Other benefits are undoubtedly the improvement of the organization's reputation and image, and the construction of long-term corporate values based on the principles of corporate social responsibility.

3. The Triple Bottom Line

Business sustainability has since evolved to incorporate strategic management aligning economic, social, and environmental objectives, fostering a commitment to responsible practices, innovation, resource efficiency, and stakeholder engagement, ultimately enhancing organizational reputation and value through corporate social responsibility. Elkington suggested looking at the business model from three perspectives of sustainability, and the result was the “The Triple Bottom Line” model (Elkington, 1994, 90–100). Elkington’s Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework introduces three key indicators, Profit, Planet and People, to assess sustainability, which offers a comprehensive approach to evaluating an organization’s impact on economic, environmental and social dimensions.

Figure 1. A holistic view of performance



Source: authors’ own work

By integrating Elkington’s Triple Bottom Line indicators, businesses and institutions can make informed decisions that transcend short-term gains, considering long-term consequences on profit, planet and people. The framework emphasizes the interdependence of economic prosperity, environmental stewardship and societal well-being. Organizations adopting this approach are better positioned to create value not only for shareholders but for a broader spectrum of stakeholders, including communities and the environment. Elkington’s visionary model challenges conventional business paradigms, prompting a paradigm shift towards sustainability and corporate responsibility. As global challenges intensify, the Triple Bottom Line serves as a compass, guiding entities towards a more conscientious and harmonious existence.

Elkington’s social indicator in the TBL framework focuses on the “People” aspect of sustainability and assesses an organization’s impact on: society, social responsibility, community well-being and equity. The Triple

Layered Business Model Canvas (TLBMC) was a tool used to build or expand the concept of sustainable business (Midgley, Arya, 2022, 10). It urges businesses to consider their role in fostering positive societal change, addressing issues such as human rights, labor practices, and community development. By incorporating this indicator, Elkington encourages a holistic evaluation of organizational performance, promoting a balance between economic success and social impact. This socially conscious approach benefits communities, enhances an entity's reputation and fosters a sense of corporate citizenship in an increasingly interconnected global landscape.

4. The three social dimensions – People

Elkington's Triple Bottom Line framework includes three dimensions which collectively assess the social impact of an organization. These dimensions under the "People" component of the TBL are presented in table 1.

Table 1

Dimensions under the "People" component

Dimensions	Components
Human Rights and Social Equity	This dimension takes into account an organization's commitment to upholding human rights, promoting fair labor practices, and ensuring social equity within its operations and supply chains.
Community Well-being	It focuses on the organization's impact on local communities. This includes evaluating the positive or negative impact of business activities on the quality of life, economic development, and general well-being of the communities in which the organization operates.
Stakeholder Engagement	Acknowledging the importance of various stakeholders, this dimension emphasizes the significance of engaging with and listening to the concerns and perspectives of different groups, such as employees, customers, partners, suppliers and the broader community.

Source: authors' own work based on Elkington (1994)

These dimensions collectively provide a comprehensive framework for assessing and improving the social responsibility of organizations as they strive for sustainability. A. Joyce, and R. L. Paquin presented a tool for designing sustainable business models by adding two additional layers to the classic Business Model Canvas: an environmental layer based on a life cycle perspective, and a social layer based on a stakeholder perspective. The authors highlighted the growing pressure for organizations to actively respond to the challenges posed by sustainable values. At the level of social aspects of business, the authors pointed out elements that should be taken into account, including social values, employees, culture, social impact, and relations with different groups of stakeholders (communities, partners).

5. Social activities and social outcomes

Growing awareness related to sustainability is leading to a search for factors that influence sustainable performance. The authors of a study of Chinese listed companies (2009–2021) found that a culture that supports green innovation and increasing information transparency improves sustainable performance in three areas (especially under conditions of high uncertainty). The cited study points to the particular importance of a culture of innovation and quality. Corporate culture is the carrier of a company's beliefs, and therefore revolves around employee involvement, environment and atmosphere, and reinforces behaviors that reflect these values (Chih-Hung Chen, 2022). Due to the long-term approach to sustainability efforts, it requires the ability to collaborate and connect within the community. Effective cooperation and community functioning is based on the development of a social system that prevents conflict (Kronenberg, Bergier, 2010, 377), and ensures security and harmonious development. Its core values are equity, meaning equality of opportunity, satisfaction of basic needs of life and the opportunity to participate in social life, solidarity, and egalitarianism, ensuring equal opportunities to participate in development (Szadzińska, 2015, 134–135). The literature also emphasizes the role of employees as the main stakeholders of the organization (Luqman, Zhang, Hina, 2023; Joyce, Paquin, 2016, 1474–1486; M. de Bussy, 2012, 280–287). Companies are facing an important social change to create long-term value for multiple stakeholders, including employees, and devote equal attention to social, environmental and economic development (Pfajfar, Shoham, Małecka, Zalaznik, 2022, 46–61). Diverse components may be considered as factors of this relationship, such as varieties pay, gender, ethnicity, and education within the organization (Joyce, Paquin, 2016, 1474–1486). Luqmand et al. noticed that employees who engage in extra-role behavior, such as proactiveness, could benefit the organization in terms of effectiveness and suitability (Luqman, Zhang, Hina, 2023), which is additionally confirmed by other researchers who claim that fostering a supportive work environment leads to better employee performance and satisfaction (Yawar, Seuring 2017, 621–643).

One of the aspects of increasing an organization's competitiveness is to fulfill sustainability expectations with regard to other business entities and the entire environment. The key here is the implementation of responsibility by the organization as a fundamental value of sustainability (Merta-Staszczak, Serafin, Staszczak, 2020, 95), which is related to the concept of CSR, based on compliance with certain conditions and values during activities and contact with stakeholders. It includes the principles of human rights, labor standards, environmental protection, anti-corruption, and voluntary social activities (Zuzek, 2012, 202). The introduction of new models of sustainable management included are: improving living conditions and building sustainable social relations through active protection of the environment conducive to creating new jobs, developing entrepreneurship, stimulating innovation, and preserving local cultural heritage. Human resources, as a social capital (cohesive community and interpersonal relations) and human capital (the situation and status of individual members of the community – their state of health, level of education, qualifications and capabilities) are among the group of factors of decisive importance for the well-being of the local community (and the development of the local economy) (Pretty, 1999, 11). The quality of human resources and the possibility of creating better conditions for development and building an aware and responsible society, in turn, is influenced by the level of education and experience acquired from the social environment (Czerna-Grygiel, 2010, 75). From the consumer perspective important issues can also be addressed, like ensuring health and safety, implementing return policies, ensuring quality, protecting personal data, maintaining transparency, and education initiatives. These actions build trust and loyalty among consumers, positively influencing their perception of the brand (Bhattacharya, Korschun, Sen, 2009, 257–272), and directly benefit the younger generation (Maloni, Brown, 2006, 35–52). Moreover, Kotler & Lee indicated that marketing and sales strategies grounded in social and environmental responsibility can attract customers and build lasting relationships, enhancing brand recognition and social impact (Kotler, Lee, 2005, 81–113).

As Farooq et al. mentioned, access to material resources, preservation of cultural heritage, and community involvement are aspects that benefit local communities, affecting environmental sustainability and economic growth. Companies engaging in these activities demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility beyond their immediate business goals (Farooq, Payaud, Merunka, Valette-Florence, 2014, 563–580). Moreover, engaging in sustainable development practices, influencing economic development, and technology transfer play a pivotal role in addressing social challenges (Cruz, 2009, 224–236). Furthermore, promoting fair competition, corporate social responsibility, and respecting intellectual property rights among supply chain participants underscores a commitment to ethical business practices (Feng, Zhu, Lai, 2017, 296–307). These actions enhance the overall transparency and integrity of the supply chain, contributing to economic and social performance outcomes (Homburg, Stierl, Bornemann, 2013, 54–72).

Social outcomes are the effect of social activities undertaken by organizations with a view not only to employees, the local community, or partners within the supply chain, but also with a view to society as a whole. Investments in research and development, efficient supply chain management, and sustainable procurement practices during pre-production significantly enhance innovation and sustainable development, fostering competitive advantage and environmental stewardship (Porter, Kramer, 2011, 62–77). Furthermore, as Elkington claims, the production process's efficiency, particularly transforming raw materials into finished goods, directly influences product quality and resource efficiency, underscoring the importance of adopting eco-friendly production technologies for reducing environmental impact (Elkington Rowland, 1999, 203). Efficient external logistics, including warehousing and delivery, is critical to customer satisfaction and company reputation, ensuring on-time delivery and minimizing CO_2 emissions, thus contributing to sustainable business practices (Christopher, 2016, 277). Finally, after-sales service and product maintenance are also key determinants of customer satisfaction and loyalty, and high quality service strengthens customer trust and fosters positive community engagement (Gronroos, 2007, 347–382). Mutually, these elements emphasize a comprehensive approach to managing corporate activities that are significant for achieving social outcomes. Furthermore, integrating innovation, sustainability, operational efficiency, social responsibility, and customer service excellence is key to fostering positive social impacts.

6. Research methodology

The primary aim of the paper is to investigate the relationship between organizational activities in the social dimension and social outcomes. The broader study, an excerpt of which is included in the article, examined results along three dimensions: economic, environmental and social. Measurement of social outcomes included, among others: employee satisfaction, health and safety at work, customer satisfaction, and participation in the development of healthy and livable communities.

In order to verify the hypotheses, a survey was conducted, for which the author's questionnaire was used (a 5-point Likert Scale were adapted). The study was conducted using a questionnaire that was intended to be appropriate for any organization regardless of size, activity profile, or affiliation to a branch of the economy. Employees with a broad view of the organizations surveyed (each respondent represented a different organization) were asked to complete the survey. The research was carried out at the end of 2022. The general population consisted of companies operating in Poland, and 303 correctly completed surveys were obtained. The respondent profiles are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

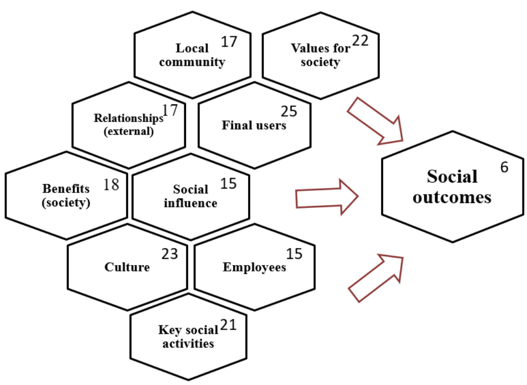
Respondents by size of organization surveyed

Enterprise size (number of employees)			
Micro (less than 10)	Small enterprises (10–49)	Medium (50–249)	Large (over 250)
133	83	60	27

Source: authors' own work

In order to examine the relation between activities in the social dimension (Joyce, Paquin, 2016, 1474–1486) and social outcomes (Zgrzywa-Ziemak, 2019, 217–270), the following key variables were defined (Fig. 2). The reliability, measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient of all variables, was higher than 0.8, which means a high level of reliability of measurement scales (information about the number of items forming each variable is provided at the top right of each variable).

Figure 2. Variables



Source: authors' own work

Variables forming the social dimension

- Final Users – The manner in which an organization's value proposition meets the needs of end users, contributing to their well-being.
- Values for Society – The impact of the organization on society at large, generating benefits for its stakeholders and the broader community.
- Scope of External Relations – The depth and breadth of the organization's impact on its stakeholders and society, including its ability to build lasting and positive relationships.
- Culture and Social Relations – The influence of the organization on culture and values, contributing to the promotion of sustainable development and social responsibility.
- Social Benefits – The positive effects of the organization's activities on society, including job creation, support for local communities, and efforts towards equality and inclusion.
- Employees – The role of employees as key stakeholders of the organization, encompassing working conditions, training, and professional development, etc.
- Key Activities – Society – The decision-making principles that define how the organization engages with stakeholders, including its ethical standards and social responsibility.
- Local Community – The organization's relationships with and impact on local communities.
- Social Impact – The consequences of the organization's activities for society, identifying areas requiring improvement or change.
- Social Outcomes – How the organization distinguishes itself from competitors in terms of employee satisfaction, occupational health and safety, customer satisfaction, participation in the development of healthy and livable communities, and compliance with social and environmental criteria by suppliers.

To verify the hypotheses describing the relationship between activities in the social dimension and social outcomes, statistical analyses were carried out. First, a correlation analysis was conducted using Pearson's coefficient.

The correlation analysis shows significant relations between all activities in the social dimension and social outcomes. It should be noted that the correlation is at a rather similar level and oscillates between 0.4 and 0.51, except one variable for which the correlation is rather low (0.22).

Since the analysis of pairwise correlations revealed strong associations, it was decided to perform stepwise regressions, and a model was obtained: $F(9.293) = 17.400$; $p < 0.001$;

Table 2

Pearson's correlation

	OUT_Soc	Final users	Relationships (external)	Values for society	Culture	Benefits (for society)	Employees	Key social activities	Local community	Social influence
Pearson's correlation	1	,0.427**	,0.485**	,0.439**	,0.400**	,0.350**	,0.515**	00.224**	,0.427**	,0.471**
Relevance (bilateral)		<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
N	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303

Source: authors' own work

This model seems to fit the data well and the regression equations can be written as follows:

Ysocial outcomes $= b_0 + b_1 \cdot X_1 + b_2 \cdot X_2 + b_3 \cdot X_3 + b_4 \cdot X_4 + b_5 \cdot X_5 + b_6 \cdot X_6 + b_7 \cdot X_7 + b_8 \cdot X_8 + b_9 \cdot X_9$

* X_1 – Local community, X_2 – Values for society, X_3 – Relationships (external), X_4 – Final users, X_5 – Benefits (for society), X_6 – Social influence, X_7 – Culture, X_8 – Employees, X_9 – Key social activities.

$Y(\text{soc\_out}) = 1,641 + 0,174 \cdot X_1 + 0,226 \cdot X_2$

X_1 – values for society; X_2 – employees

7. Conclusions

Statistical studies show that higher social outcomes of a company are influenced by two variables: values for society and employees. This means that it is important to improve employees' skills in professional dimensions as well as social areas. Taking care to properly safeguard their privacy, flexibility in the workplace and non-discrimination are important elements that build these behaviors. Any policy that leads to increased awareness of ethical, legal or buyer awareness behaviors about the activities of the company itself and its products leads to employee development, which involves more than just professional matters.

Directly, employees' sense of security is influenced by an appropriately constructed organizational culture focused on ethical actions or actions in accordance with the company's policies. Treating employees fairly and equitably, as well as building trust in the relationship between them and the company, allows for a work-life balance. On the other hand, the significant impact of employees on society is based on the company's support of activities for local initiatives, but also the opportunity to co-determine the products offered.

All these elements result in better social outcomes of the enterprise, which means higher levels of employee and customer satisfaction, lower job turnover, higher levels of meeting social criteria by suppliers, and participation in the development of healthy and livable communities.

8. Research limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered in the interpretation and implications of its results. The social outcomes indicator was subjective and consisted of a limited number of items. Using objective indicators or collecting data through in-depth interviews would result in more precise data. Likewise, increasing the size of the research sample and expanding the research to include companies operating in other countries (replication of research) would allow for generalization of the results (as described results may be specific to companies operating in Poland). Exogenous situational factors can be used to explore the relationship between social action and sustainable organizational performance in future research.

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