**SustEcon Conference Proceedings**

# Obstacles to Sustainability
# In Public Discourse
## The Case of a Transitional Economy - Poland

By Lech W. Zacher

## Background information

The international conference „**SustEcon Conference – The contribution of a sustainable economy to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals**" took place on **25 and 26 September 2017** at the Freie Universität in Berlin, Germany (organised by the NaWiKo project).

The focus of the conference was on the contributions of the sustainable economy to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This contribution can be observed on a number of different levels: Innovations toward achieving the SDGs are to be as much a topic at the conference as methodological questions about measuring sustainability. In addition to that, the differences between various discourses and concepts and their respective contributions to the sustainable economy were also featured prominently in the conference. A further topic of interest was the (political) framework conditions and barriers to a sustainable economy as well as the contribution of science to the SDGs.

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Lech W. ZACHER
Kozminski University
Warsaw, Poland
lzacher@alk.edu.pl

OBSTACLES TO SUSTAINABILITY – IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

(The Case of a Transitional Economy – Poland)


Requirements for sustainability in economy and society should be tailored to a given country or region. General models which often dominate academic discourse are an important part of necessary social knowledge for decision makers, media, NGOs, etc.. They are formulated in universally relevant categories and constitute a kind of preamble to the sustainability ideology. This framework adopted by politicians in the form of the UN SDGs does not automatically ensure a smooth sustainability transformation. Implementation of the SDGs is dependent not only on the diverse contexts of countries in question but also on an evaluation of these goals related to their feasibility, costs, urgency, and prioritization, and their mutual conditioning (not easy to recognize and forecast). Strategies and policies are not clearly evident and should be a subject of public debates (there is also a substantial diversity of type and level of democracy, public engagement, citizens' activism, media actions and the like) and public participation in determining them. This is not rarely overlooked in the Western scientific and political debates. A good example is the country of Poland with its transitional economy and changing political system. Poland's problems with sustainability transformation are substantially different from the highly developed Western democracies, which is not necessarily manifested in their media and politics. This difference is often underestimated, and in spite of that it explains well the difficulties, failures, and ineffectiveness of its way to sustainable development.


1. Public discourse in Poland concerning a transition to a sustainable economy has many dimensions and orientations in recent years. Participants in this discourse are multiple and differentiated: public declarations, speeches, programs delivered by government officials, various academic groups and university units, students' debates and actions, NGOs, and media messages and reports in the press, TV, and social media. It seems that in recent decades the public consciousness has radically increased. However, public attention was directed towards environmental issues: environmental protection, environmental losses, and possible dangers.

Priorities of the transitional economy were different from sustainability requirements. Getting out of a Communist type economy (called by J. Kornai a shortage economy) was difficult and focused on privatization, deregulation, opening economic borders, and anti-inflationary policies. The so-called "shock therapy" (Balcerowicz plan based on IMF recommendations) basically directed a fast economic change and economic growth (social costs were rather neglected). Social costs of this

transformation were high: bankruptcies, unemployment, social exclusion . The country had no experience in such a transition – from a centrally-planned economy to a private open capitalist one. People were neither prepared, nor ready.

The geo-political and economic location of the Polish economy drastically changed. A pro-Western orientation started not only in economy, trade, cooperation, tourism, and media. The country's priorities were economic growth (not really development which is a broader goal), short term stabilization, liquidation of ineffective branches and companies, and stimulation of FDI, which were more effective, modern, and somewhat more environment friendly. The aforementioned *de facto* revolutionary changes were politically important. On the surface both the Western countries and Poland seemed to be quite connected and similar. However, socio-cultural changes connected i.a. with economic knowledge, management, international cooperation, entrepreneurship, democratic procedures were delayed and neglected to some extent. Technological changes – in accordance with W. Ogburn thesis – were ahead of socio-cultural and mental changes. It was not and still is not properly recognized and was underestimated. Moreover multidimensional and complex transitional processes are not completed yet.   Convulsions of change, often seen as temporary, are still vivid. Their consequences are unexpected (recalling Taleb's "black swans" phenomena), but costly.

It seems that new insights, new language, and new knowledge should shape social imaginary in public discourse. This discourse is controversial and often not transparent and conclusive not only because of contradictory interests of different subjects (representing politics, business, citizens, also science sphere and media), but also because the present day world and communication is full of post-truth and fake news, not to mention manipulative post-politics. Many disputes are based on different data and conflicting interpretations (e.g. concerning environmental or health safety) and evaluations.

This situation generates a need of careful and insightful analysis of the state of emerging sustainability ideology (in education, media, politics, religion), and elaborated strategies and policies (of government and businesses) and human behaviors (attitudes, convictions, lifestyles, models of consumption). The analysis should be conducted to recognize and interpret the barriers and obstacles in order to join a sustainability wave propagated by the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2. There are many factors, conditions and contexts, and activities (e.g. of foreign businesses, trade unions) and actions of citizens (of consumers, NGOs) to be investigated. The list is long. Below are exemplary issues (emerging partially, often biased in media and political discourse):
  − history and heritage (historical peripherization, important role of religion, emerging opposition to Pope Francis' teachings, reviving political nationalism),
  − path dependence (agriculture, traditional industrial structure (small hi-tech sector), coal mining, coal energy use, employment structure),
  − shallow modernization hypothesis (late changes, not equally effective, poor networking),

- structural problems (domination of SMEs – not producing and not demanding innovations, brain drain, youth emigration),
- clashes of different rationalities (government, business, civil society; national vs local, the EU aid and requirements, TNCs),
- small and poor public sphere (overprivatization of environment – new regulations, "saint" property right; housing development devastates nature),
- R&D sphere poorly financed (less than 1% GDP) for decades (lack of interdisciplinarity), few innovations and patents, lack of eco-innovations, weak TA research and applications,
- education not environmentally-oriented; religions interpretation of life, subjugation of nature to man (Bible), animals as things (environmental ethics refused),
- public media conservative and controlled by government (environmentalists treated as public enemies – leftists, anarchists, vegetarians, animal laws defenders),
- environmental movements fragmented and weak,
- media reporting "both sides"- pros and cons (not clear solution message for public),
- traditional lifestyles – outgoing from the poverty, meat diet, waste not important, not really segregated, water not saved, quality of life not important (e.g. toleration of smog),
- priority of growth (and egoistic individualism) and its ideology, overwhelming desire of becoming rich (environment just a source),
- powerful lobbies (in parliament, in media, in trade unions) of old industries (coal, energy, hunting) and nomenclature management (anti-market),
- weak civil society (short traditions, lack of money, NGOs financially controlled by government),
- populistic policies (further coal dependence, alternative energy not really supported limited presumption); nationalistic attitudes to the European integration and environmental international cooperation (e.g. in climate policy, $CO_2$ emission, migration); environmental policy based on short term economic criteria (e.g. carving the unique Bialowieza forest),
- legislation not protecting properly environment (e.g. infrastructural undertakings as e.g. highway devastating "Natura 2000" areas),
- government's plans and rhetoric are declaratively pro sustainability, in practice limited implementation (economic short term thinking dominates).
- lack of comprehensive, holistic and systemic long term strategy leading towards a multidimensional sustainability.

The aforementioned problems constitute a complicated and unclear context of public discourse and of policies and citizens' actions (called often eco-terrorism). Ideologization and politization of this discourse is excessive and is what prevents consensus on facts and evaluations.

Civil society is the only hope, but conservative government, parliament, and a big part of society are not apt to accept and implement practical SDGs (this is not the case only of Poland, e.g. see Trump policy on fossil fuels, or German Volkswagen scandal). Some optimism can be provided by the knowledge sector, progressive media, and international organizations (UN, NGOs, EU etc.). Some new ideas (e.g. of N. Klein or J. Rifkin), concepts, and experiments in life styles are slightly influencing the Polish youth, which is generally right wing ideologically. Hopefully, the consciousness of society and decision-makers will be changing toward sustainability and positively modifying the economy, politics, education, consumption, and lifestyles.

3. The discussed above obstacles to multidimensional sustainability should be precisely presented, measured, analyzed, and evaluated (a multicriterial approach and democratic procedures are primordial). To have a good public discourse – with appropriate data, transparent, and not ideological and manipulative – it is necessary to use rational arguments, long term perspective, and just social distribution criteria.

Considering the aforementioned issues one can construct a descriptive model comprising them and investigate imaginatively all mutual feedbacks and influences. Then such factors, mechanisms, conditions, and contexts can be prospectively evaluated and transformed into an impact model (especially important for badly impacted subjects by costs of transformations or exclusion). Then a strategy and policy actions model – based on descriptions and evaluated impacts – can be set up with supplementing recommendations from SDG programs.

Of course some changes connected with Poland's transition and functioning within the EU should be especially underlined, not to mention international surroundings and generational change. Globalization (role of FDIs and TNCs) and the Internet should be included as values and/or challenges for the sustainability transformation. Parameters of time and costs accountability as well as socio-cultural dimensions, often disregarded in political discourse, should be stressed to make this transformation real.

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