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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.

Table 1. Human Capital Index (HCI), Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and Real GDP per inhabitant in 2013 for the EU countries

| | HCI 2013 | Education | Health and wellness | Workforce and employment | Enabling environment | CPI 2013 | Real GDP Euro per inhabitant |
|----------------|---------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------|------------------------------|
| Finland | 1.406 | 1.601 | 0.844 | 1.25 | 1.926 | 89 | 30300 |
| Netherlands | 1.161 | 1.106 | 0.901 | 1.15 | 1.484 | 83 | 32300 |
| Sweden | 1.111 | 0.977 | 0.96 | 1.154 | 1.351 | 89 | 35600 |
| Germany | 1.109 | 0.888 | 0.877 | 1.149 | 1.522 | 78 | 30200 |
| United Kingdom | 1.042 | 1.031 | 0.682 | 1.072 | 1.384 | 76 | 30600 |
| Denmark | 1.024 | 0.891 | 0.943 | 0.932 | 1.33 | 91 | 37200 |
| Belgium | 0.985 | 1.191 | 0.78 | 0.673 | 1.296 | 75 | 29500 |
| Austria | 0.977 | 0.713 | 0.886 | 0.886 | 1.424 | 69 | 32200 |
| Luxembourg | 0.881 | 0.522 | 0.704 | 0.928 | 1.372 | 80 | 62400 |
| Ireland | 0.824 | 1.033 | 0.516 | 0.645 | 1.103 | 72 | 36200 |
| France | 0.746 | 0.776 | 0.744 | 0.52 | 0.943 | 71 | 27600 |
| Estonia | 0.571 | 0.862 | 0.536 | 0.142 | 0.745 | 68 | 9800 |
| Malta | 0.473 | 0.716 | 0.473 | 0.33 | 0.371 | 56 | 13800 |
| Spain | 0.465 | 0.59 | 0.778 | -0.185 | 0.679 | 59 | 20100 |
| Portugal | 0.453 | 0.411 | 0.532 | 0.243 | 0.624 | 62 | 14300 |
| Cyprus | 0.452 | 0.938 | 0.352 | 0.252 | 0.268 | 63 | 16400 |
| Slovenia | 0.445 | 0.825 | 0.516 | 0.106 | 0.332 | 57 | 14800 |
| Czech Republic | 0.387 | 0.452 | 0.31 | 0.21 | 0.576 | 48 | 11300 |
| Lithuania | 0.36 | 0.745 | 0.252 | -0.018 | 0.462 | 57 | 8500 |
| Italy | 0.266 | 0.378 | 0.601 | -0.243 | 0.329 | 43 | 22400 |
| Latvia | 0.248 | 0.615 | 0.151 | -0.011 | 0.237 | 53 | 7100 |
| Croatia | 0.099 | 0.394 | 0.526 | -0.378 | -0.146 | 48 | 8400 |
| Poland | 0.087 | 0.376 | 0.173 | -0.139 | -0.064 | 60 | 8700 |
| Hungary | 0 | 0.53 | -0.064 | -0.275 | -0.19 | 54 | 9000 |
| Greece | -0.011 | 0.28 | 0.331 | -0.365 | -0.291 | 40 | - |
| Bulgaria | -0.048 | 0.281 | 0.333 | -0.496 | -0.311 | 41 | 3800 |
| Romania | -0.176 | 0.077 | 0.048 | -0.364 | -0.463 | 43 | 4800 |
| Slovakia | - | - | - | - | - | 47 | 9500 |

Data sources: World Economic Forum. (2013). Transparency International. (2013). Eurostat. (2014).

Based on a set of data referring to the EU members (Table no 1), we intend to analyze if there are some quantifiable influences between them. We are going to test if the level of economic development, measured by real GDP per capita, can be explained in connection with HCI and CPI.

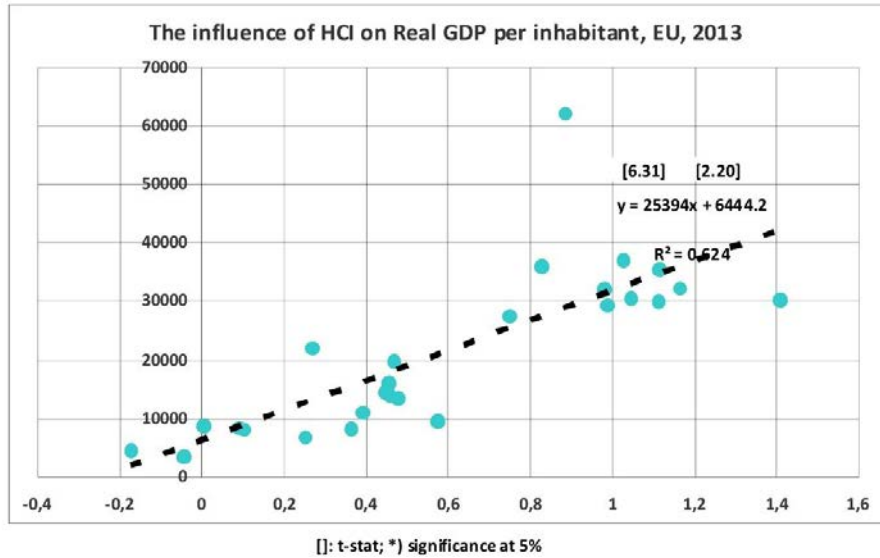


Figure no. 1 –The influence of HCI on Real GDP per inhabitant in EU countries in 2013

We have removed Greece and Slovakia because there were no complete records for these countries. However the graph (Figure no. 1) shows a positive relation between HCI and the level of development. Regression proves that this correlation is statistically significant in this format as HCI explain 64% of the level of development recorded in 2013 in the EU. As CPI = 0 means highly corrupt, and CPI = 100 means very clean, Romania, with its score of 43 (only Bulgaria has a lower level of CPI – 41 – in EU in 2013), as it is shown in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2013 Brochure, “has a serious corruption problem” (Transparency International, 2013). This perception of the population about the corruption can be also considered a measure of the social capital that represents the degree of functionality of the relations and of the institutions within a society.

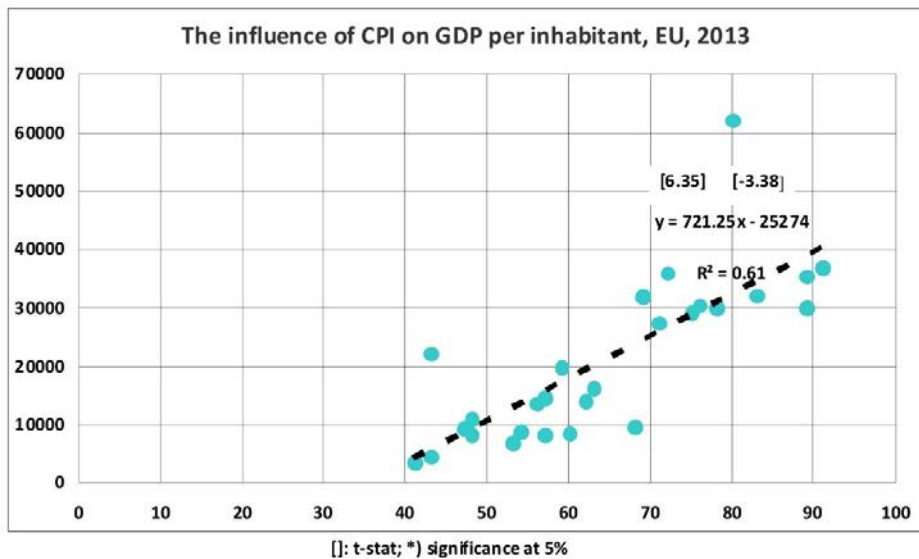


Figure no. 2 –The influence of CPI on Real GDP per inhabitant in EU countries in 2013

Regarding the influence of CPI on real GDP per inhabitant, we have removed Greece because there were no complete records for this country. The graph (Figure no. 2) shows a positive relation between the CPI and the development, indicating that it increases as the level of corruption is lower. Statistical tests show the robustness of this correlation.

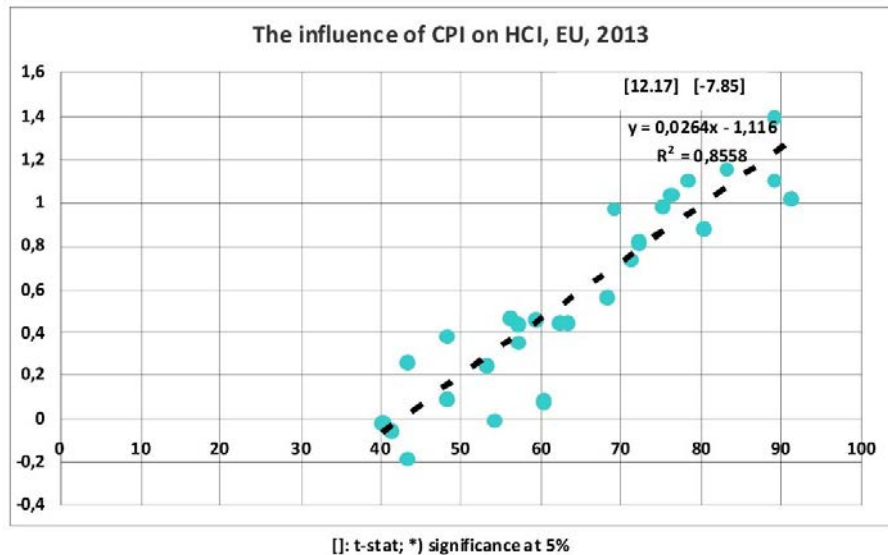


Figure 3 –The influence of CPI on HCI in EU countries in 2013

Regarding the influence of CPI on HCI, we have removed Greece and Slovakia because there were no complete records for these countries. The correlation is positive and statistically significant, fact proved by the statistical regression tests attached. That means that as CPI increases (as decreases the level of corruption) HCI increases.

As data have shown, the situation in Romania is not very good. According to the data, Romania has the lowest HCI in European Union, also the lowest coefficient for the education pillar. On the other hand, it is on the penultimate position in terms of perception of corruption and in terms of real GDP per inhabitant.

Regarding the social capital, measuring the trust of population in the public institutions it's also a method of evaluating this capital at a certain moment of time. In February 2013 was conducted by INSCOP Research, at the request of "Adevarul" newspaper, a survey entitled "Public Opinion Barometer – The truth about Romania". The research was conducted on a sample of 1066 people and is representative of the Romanian population 18 years and over 18 years, the MPE data is $\pm 3\%$ at a confidence level of 95%. Survey results indicate the following percentages of the population trust in state institutions: in the church 67%, in the army 63%, in the police 47%, in the city hall 45%, 40% in Government, in Parliament 33% and 30% for the President (INSCP Research, 2013).

As can be seen on a first brief analysis of social capital in Romania, it has a fairly low level. Trust within the society and civic involvement are usually seen as measures of the social capital.

3. Social and cultural values in Romania and how they reflect and influence the morality of the nation

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. Moral values in Romania suffered more fractures in the 19th and in the 20th century.

According to Tudor Vianu, a first fracture in the evolution of social values in Romanian society took place in the early 19th century, between religious values, "our old guide", and the French revolutionary democratic rationalism. (Vianu, 1982, p. 351)

In 1945, as a forced change of the political regime – from the capitalist to the communist organization, change was accompanied by a powerful communist propaganda; there was a first break from the previous period, and a first

fracture of the values. Religion has become the “opium for the people” and private property became a crime. Romanian personalities, intellectuals, priests, but also capitalists and peasants, attached to national, spiritual, and democratic values were imprisoned, killed, sent to forced labor. “The communist morality” that accompanied industrialization, urbanization and forced agricultural cooperatives have displaced people, destroyed small communities which had built and transmitted from generation to generation Romanian cultural/traditional values.

Starting with December 1989, people have tried to reverse this process. But the communist “fence” was very tall and powerful. So it’s hard for many adults from Romania to learn the democratic system and the free market mechanism. Similar processes took place in other post-communist countries. Still, as figures have shown, the situation in Romania seems to be not so bright. Deprivation of citizenship and freedom of speech, very strict interdictions on travelling outside the Communist bloc, material difficulties in the communist period, more intense than in other communist countries, were sources of intense frustration and disinformation for Romanian citizens. After 1989, perhaps a part of the population felt an acute need to compensate for these privations endured in the past. Under the influence of individualistic conceptions which prompts man to be concerned primarily on his needs, desires, utility, pleasures, emphasizing and legitimizing his natural, instinctual human inclinations, in the spectrum of finitude, was largely induced and embraced the opinion that “we have one life that it has to be lived to the fullest”. Because wages are low, much lower than those of people living in countries in Western Europe and North America, and the costs are high (including or especially those for basic needs), and, on the other hand, as the temptations to enjoy life in the same way as those in developed countries are large, the Romanians legitimately have started to try to find ways to earn more money working long hours, looking for a better job or having two jobs or other activities. This means less time spent with the family and with the children, constant preoccupation about the work, having less and less free time. Some of them have forgotten or abandoned the path of moral principles.

As we have shown (Figures no. 2 and 3), it seems that high corruption lowers the level of development and also the level of human capital, so both economic and human development are affected. But we think that the correlation could be bidirectional in both cases: low levels of economic development makes harder to find a well-paid job, so it’s harder to get money for a decent life, so the incentives for corruption are higher. And low level of human development in education terms, lower human capital, means unsatisfying wages, as the returns of the investment in education are small, so the temptation to get money in immoral ways, like corruption, is more intense. Less education might also mean less knowledge and a poorer understanding of the moral principles: “One cause of immorality is ignorance which is sometimes manifested in blind acceptance of others’ beliefs without adequately investigating the truth for ourselves.” (Rodney & Charken, 2009) But this is not the main cause of lack of morality in a direct way. A moral value, even not extremely well understood at an axiological level, can be felt, might be emotionally introverted, and this is the way to the third part of the moral intelligence – volition, that leads a man to act morally. In the traditional Romanian small communities the social values were similar to the moral values generally accepted as “good”. You hadn’t had to be very educated in order to know what is good and what is bad, there were some simple precepts that people knew and followed as a small traditional community is always a vigilant guardian of the morality as is socially accepted at that moment of time. And more than that, the collective actions require the transparent, visible participation of all members of the community, individualistic and free rider phenomena (Olson, 2002) are not so easily put in action. But now increasingly more people live alone in large urban areas. They are the “targets” of mass communication - real communication in the community is diminished, it is sometimes reduced to transmissions of commercial, political, cultural messages. And often communication is thus reduced to a simple manipulation. Or, sometimes, the televisions are simply aiming to achieve scores for television ratings, in this case they offer to the public “what the public wants”. The cultural and the value level of the entertainment incites sometimes to immorality and violence. Less education might decrease, in our opinion, the capacity of understanding the societal environment in its complexity; people less educated are more permissive to the inner invasion of the social values as they are “spread” by mass-media, the most powerful, and thus the most dangerous channel of communication/transmission/manipulation.

What about young people? They are receiving knowledge and information from the adults involved in their education - parents and teachers. In what extent their parents and their teachers are role models for them? We all have had teachers that impressed us. Some teachers with vocation change their students’ lives. Still, “It must be noted, however, that teachers in Romania have the lowest absolute statutory salaries in Europe.” (European Commission, Eurydice, 2013, p. 55) There have been done many, maybe too many changes in the educational

system in Romania. But have these measures led to better results? This matter has to be analyzed in detail. The fact is that teachers get very low wages and this might decrease the level of competency in the field. In order to be role models for the children, the teachers must combine professional knowledge, pedagogical skills and human values. (Lumpkin, 2008) The teaching process itself, the teacher's general behavior in the class room, as he is perceived to be "the educator" influences the children's perception about education in general and represents a significant part of the moral formation of young people. In David's Hansen opinion, "[...] moral education can also be seen as an ongoing, inherent dimension of classroom life. The everyday business of the classroom is potentially as rich in moral lessons as are the most ambitious curricula." (Hansen, 1995)

The social values are transmitted also through other channels. The groups that young people are involved in – in real life or on the internet where they create, on social networks, groups of thousands of members – under the influence of pop culture, urban culture, rock culture and other cultural trends (that I'm not aware of), absorb and transform, recreate these social values into some new ones. These might be the social values of the generation of adults that is growing now. This is part of the major fracture in the cultural tradition that has happened in Romania after 1989. The changes are more intense, more virulent in urban areas, in big cities.

The need for morality was always present in human societies. Religion is a way of living in some communities and in those cases it plays an important and in some extent effective role in creating the moral conscious, or at least, the moral behavior. But even so, these communities are not isolated from the rest of the world.

Philosophy – namely axiology, the moral philosophy, the culture philosophy – has studied values generally speaking, moral values and virtue/s, norms, moral conscious, social and cultural values, culture, civilization.

On the other hand, developmental and moral psychology tried to find ways for moral human development or, more recently, for what they call moral intelligence as "the mental capacity to determine how universal human principles should be applied to our values, goals, and actions." (Lennick & Kiel, 2005, p. xxxiii) Continuing Jean Piaget research, Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1976) fathered a theory that described moral development on six stages, the first one representing the response to coercion that is usually applied if the moral norms are not obeyed. The question that rises is if we intend to help our children, through moral education and by other means (i.e. less corruption, more moral mass-media, and official recognition of the value of the teachers' status in the society etc.) to become human beings with moral conscious. "The rules have an abstract, general, impersonal form; only by internalizing the value dimensions can be obtained a true regulation of human behavior, generated inside the human feelings, and not by a flat conformism. The human personality is built by harmonizing subjectively felt, anticipated, and sought duty, and objective, imposed from the outside social duty. The respect for rules can't be reduced to the mere moral of correctness, but it has to be incorporated to a moral of conviction (orientated to humanistic significances and grounds) and, simultaneously, to a moral of responsibility for the consequences of our acts. The real internalization of the normative codes cannot motivate the simple fidelity to the rules, but it stimulates the closeness to their value significance, and the devotion to this dimension exhorts exactly to consider the rules as being what they are: means for recommending, in terms of action, a value." (Macoviciuc, 1999, p. 595)

4. Conclusions

To say moral education is, in fact, pleonastic. Education is meant to transmit knowledge, experiences and values from generation to generation, for human development and progress. So, the education cannot be immoral, as real development cannot be unsustainable.

"Moral values are purposes of life. No one feels the need to legitimize the pursuit of moral values in the service of other purposes which they might serve. On the contrary, the conscious feels so clear their condition of being purposes, that it justifies the sacrifice of other values of life when only this is the possible way for achieving those. While the sacrifice of the moral values in order to obtain relative values, such as economic values, is censored by the conscious as an absurdity or unworthiness, the sacrifice of the latter seems completely legitimate. [...] We say this because the moral values find their reward in themselves [...]" was writing in 1945 Tudor Vianu (Vianu, 1982, p. 99). The aim of this paper is to emphasize that can't be sustainable development without morality, which is a very important purpose by itself, and for its major implications on social life.

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