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DEONTOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

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Abstract: The authors aimed to define the role of deontology in the implementation of sustainable development (SD) and show how consumers guided by the ethics of duty can become the initiator of common changes for SD. The article was prepared on the basis of qualitative research, and emphasizes that the concept of SD is strongly axiologically conditioned, and deontology plays a unique implementation role. The internalization of SD moral values is the key condition for the realization of sustainability both at macroeconomic and microeconomic level, i.e. enterprise management and consumer decisions. The authors indicate that in the market economy, in the era of globalization, the initiators of universal and evolutionary changes for SD may be consumers guided by the ethics of duty and supporting the sustainable consumerism movement. The article describes the main activities of the sustainable consumerism movement and the barriers slowing down its development.

Keywords: sustainable development (SD), deontology of sustainable consumption, sustainable consumerism, sustainable management, civil society.

1. Introduction

The global threats which emerged at the end of the twentieth century as the consequences of rapid use of natural resources, increase of human population, fast urbanization, unsatisfied basic needs of people and global destabilization of natural

and socio-economic systems, made different groups of politicians and activists look for the rational solutions of those problems (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens III, 1972, p. 190; Rockstrom et al., 2009).[1]

The proposed solution is the concept of sustainable development (SD) and the associated new SD economy (an alternative concept to neoclassical economics), which assumes the simultaneous implementation of three basic strategic paths of sustainability by all market economy actors (*Our common…*, 1987; Rogall, 2010). It is essential to be aware that the SD concept and the forming of a SD economy are strongly axiologically determined. This awareness is crucial for the effective implementation of SD in both macroeconomic and microeconomic terms, i.e. business management and consumer decisions. It will not be possible for societies to become widely, truly, and deeply involved in the implementation of SD treated as a priority of modern civilization, without specifying the axiological foundations and examining to what extent they are internally consistent. It needs to be found whether they fit into the current socio-economic system, if they are compatible with it or, on the contrary, if they cause a severe clash of values.

The analysis of the axiological foundations of SD carried out by the authors, indicates the special implementation significance of the deontological approach, i.e. the ethics of duty. Duty-based ethics is essentially characterized by a focus on obedience to the independent moral rules and duties. In order to make the optimal moral choices, people must understand what their duties are and what rules are to be applied in order to regulate those duties.

The article aims to define the role of deontology in the implementation of sustainable development and show how consumers guided by the ethics of duty can become the initiator of universal changes for sustainable development.

The issues discussed in the article are interdisciplinary, covering many research areas, including management, economics, social policy, philosophy, ethics, sociology and psychology. The study was prepared on the basis of qualitative research, namely literature review, group discussions on sustainable consumption, the authors' participation in sustainable lifestyle campaigns, and many years of the observation of the activities of educational and consumer organizations for SD.

2. The role of deontology in the implementation of sustainable development

The literature on the subject often emphasized that the SD concept's implementation is strongly axiologically conditioned (see e.g. Borys, 2020, pp. 73-126; Papuziński, 2020; Rogall, 2010, pp. 180-218). The ethical perspective in obtaining SD plays among others a significant role because: (1) moral values are cognitive – they are the

[1] For example, underlining the importance of SD at the subsequent Earth Summits and other meetings concerning the world-wide scope of SD.

source of the knowledge on the most essential goals and tasks of a given concept; (2) moral values are evaluative – they can help to assess particular theories and programs, at the same time enabling to correct their practical realization both in overall as well as in specific situations; (3) clearly articulated and consciously accepted moral values intensify motivations and obligations towards something – set up not only for the individuals, but also institutions; (4) conscious moral values enable to solve or at least minimize to a great extent different conflicts between people (society), economy and the environment, but among others they can help to make decisions that do not interfere with the basic interests of a singular person, society and nature (Tyburski, 2005, pp. 47-48).[2]

The analysis of the axiological foundations of the idea of SD indicates the unique role of the deontological approach. The ethical dimension of SD addresses the question of *what we should do* and emphasizes the essence of moral obligations between people and their natural environment (Dean, 2006; Gillroy, 1998; Matvicychuk, 2014; Mulia, Kumar Behura, & Kar, 2016). The ethics of the obligation to implement sustainable actions take into account overriding and universal values, such as people's responsibility for others, including the condition of the natural environment, and intra and intergenerational justice. SD values also take into account: economic development within the limits of nature's endurance, high quality of life, peaceful coexistence, cooperation, brotherhood, sharing, the good of the general public, social inclusion, equal opportunities, respect for all people and nature, and participatory democracy. Individuals' duties need to be consistent not only with the law or accepted principles, but should result from the will to act under these values.

Deontological ethics essentially denies the actual moral value to those acts that result from individual inclinations, personal pleasures, or individual interests. The basis of this ethics is duty and duty to the moral law. Declarations such as: "I want to help people who are starving in developing countries", "I only buy sustainable products", "I save water", can only result from the rational will of ones referring to duty.[3]

It is accepted that deontological thought originates from the Kantian idea of Categorical Imperative. The German philosopher, in formulating deontology, proposed a moral system which supposed to provide a set of universal principles that would not be judged by anyone's subjective experience or tradition. The right or wrong of an action should be rather determined by autonomous human pure reasoning. In his "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" Kant writes: <…> act only in accordance with that maxim, whereby you can at the same time will that it becomes an universal law (Kant, 1997, p. 31). If a person follows a principle that allows him/her to say that his/her actions are right and morally justified, then this principle should become a universal law. That maxim constitutes the Categorical

[2] More on the role of values in (Kluckhon, 1962).

[3] More on the normative approach of ethics in (Scanlon, 1998).

Imperative which: (1) establishes the aims to make certainty of action, (2) defines constraints of subjective desires and (3) is universally valuable for everyone to act on (McNaughton & Rawling, 2007, pp. 436-437).

At this point the notion of duty needs to be more specified. A reasonable platform for further discourse was provided by J. Rawls in "A Theory of Justice" (2005). The American philosopher, referring mainly to Kant's thought, models society's basic structure, which requires establishing an objectively binding social contract. In order to establish the most rational concept of equitable law, its legislators are to choose the optimal concept of justice and the duties of individuals resulting from it (Rawls, 2005, p. 109).

When Rawls writes about moral requirements, he plainly distinguishes between 'natural duties' and 'obligations'. Natural duties are imposed upon each of us unconditionally. As rational human individuals, we are responsible to everyone because of each person's equal moral value. Rawls gives an exemplary set of natural duties: *the duty of helping another when he is in need or jeopardy, provided that one can do so without excessive risk or loss to oneself; the duty not to harm or injure another; and the duty not to cause unnecessary suffering* (Rawls, 2005, p. 114).

On the other hand, *obligations* refer to the established rules of participation in fair social institutions that each of us uses daily. Obligations concern the top-down principles of society's functioning and undoubtedly result from the voluntary decisions of each moral individual. So *the principles of fairness* created for the social contract constitute *obligations* which are institutionally defined (Rawls, 2005, p. 112).[4] They play the role of a test of how public office agents should behave both towards each other and also towards individuals who are not institutionalized.

The deontological approach speaks to the awareness of individuals – it provides more conscious attitudes towards the human lifestyle, free of any subjective preferences, values and ends. It refers to universal arguments about people's responsibilities to care for others, including the natural environment, in the context of present as well as future generations.

Several decades of international discussion and cooperation have identified individuals and organizations' responsibilities in the implementation of SD, arising from the overarching values of this concept. In practice, this means that all socio-economic actors should pursue three strategic paths of the SD economy (cf. Rogall, 2010):

1) efficiency – assumes a tenfold increase in resource efficiency,
2) cohesion – consists of developing new products that are fully sustainable and
3) adequacy – means a gradual change in organizations' operation and individuals' lifestyles in a socially responsible manner.

These paths are a practical reflection of the imperative of SD. The most important of these, and at the same time the most demanding in terms of personal commitment

[4] This argument Rawls relates to Hart's fair-play concept of political obligation, see: (Hart, 1955, p. 185; Klosko, 1994).

and sacrifice, is the strategy of adequacy (self-restraining), which is not achievable without any socio-economic operator accepting the ethics of duty and the need to abandon socially harmful patterns of development.

Despite this seemingly proper deontological perspective of the idea of SD, the international efforts to promote global sustainability since the 1960s have been too slow concerning the dramatically shrinking performance of ecosystem services (cf. e.g. *Ecosystems and Human*…, 2005). Additionally, they are also of a niche or often superficial or even façade nature.[5] On a global scale, there is a dominance of unbalance, both in macro and micro-economic terms, which endangers modern civilization with a disaster, e.g. anarchy, totalitarianism, wars for limited resources. The authors propose a thesis for further discussion that the situation could change positively if there were a sufficiently large and organized group of social actors, guided by the overarching values of SD in its day-to-day activities, and thus be able to bring about global (worldwide) and sustainable systemic changes supporting SD quickly, peacefully and evolutionarily.

From a deontological perspective, two main reasons for the absence of such a group can be identified:

1. **Insufficient internalization of ethical standards and values related to the concept of SD** by various groups of socio-economic actors, i.e. legislators, governments and local governments, entrepreneurs, NGOs, consumer education organizations and the media;

2. **Framework conditions for the socio-economic system in support of unsustainable solutions**. There is a significant negative impact of consumerism on the state of the planet and the socio-economic system, such as negative externalities, weakening of regulatory democratic mechanisms through the lobby of transnational corporations and growing conflicts between SD values and systemic solutions strengthening consumerism. Within this area the most important issues include the lack of transparency in production and service delivery processes, the lack of effective solutions to prevent employees' rights violations or production in such a way that products break down shortly after the warranty expires and are not repairable cheaply, the lack of sufficiently effective mechanisms to combat policy-corrupting by transnational corporations, the omission of many social costs in the company's cost accounting such as the reduction of biodiversity and the ability of ecosystems to provide services, the long-term negative health impact of GMOs, and chemical food additives and medicines with toxic substances.

Unfortunately there is a negative feedback loop between the two reasons mentioned above. The lack of internalization of ethical values of SD by the majority of society results in the strengthening of purely profit-oriented systemic solutions and the deepening of consumerism with a shift in focus to meeting needs mainly through the consumption of material goods and the preference for sensory pleasures.

[5] E.g. greenwashing.

This mechanism even applies to the process of providing services which, despite their inherently intangible nature, are becoming increasingly dependent on supporting tangible products.[6] On the other hand, systemic solutions that constitute the dominance of profit as an overarching value and the further development of consumerism contribute to increasing barriers to the internalization of SD values by society.

This fact is one of the main reasons for the so-called behavioural gap (attitude-behaviour or intention-behaviour gap), namely the large discrepancy between the declared willingness to take sustainable actions and actual actions (Cotte & Trudel, 2009; Vermeir & Verbecke, 2006). The smaller the gap, the higher the socio-economic operator's sustainability level.[7]

3. Sustainable consumerism as the initiator of a positive transition for sustainable development[8]

A rapid interruption of the above-characterized negative feedback loop would require a top-down, prescriptive introduction of effective systemic solutions by a socially responsible public administration. If this were at all possible, it would be a denial of the democratic approach, one of the SD's central values.[9]

The democratic implementation of SD supporting instruments is impossible without a sufficient representation of the SD values' supporters in society – the majority of aware citizens who, by their social involvement, will be ready to support sustainable products and companies with their purchasing funds and to support political parties opting for sustainable development system solutions, e.g. subsidies and the development of public transport, passive construction and organic farming.

According to the theory of social diffusion (the so-called diffusion of innovation), the initiation of universal changes in society's behaviour requires the achievement of the *critical mass* of citizens, i.e. depending on the circumstances from around 10%-25% of people permanently practising new behavioural patterns (Rogers, 1983, p. 245; Watts & Doods, 2007).

In the conditions of a market economy, in global capitalism it seems that consumers who internalized the SD values and practise new patterns of sustainable

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[6] E.g. modern hairdressing service requires the use of specialist salon equipment and a range of hair care cosmetic products, causing water pollution and an increase in the number of used packaging.

[7] It is worth emphasizing that even socio-economic operators with a high level of knowledge about SD, ready for individual sacrifices, often face serious choices between conflicting values, e.g. the need to travel to work by private car due to the lack of public transport sufficiently developed and supported by state policy (this example applies to the employer's market, when it is difficult to change the workplace).

[8] The section was prepared, among others, on the basis of group discussions on sustainable consumption, the authors' participation in sustainable lifestyle campaigns and many years of observation of the activities of educational and consumer organizations for SD.

[9] The threat of the so-called eco-dictatorship.

behaviour, can achieve critical mass and become in the future the initiators of positive rapid and universal systemic changes for SD (Zaremba-Warnke, 2012).

Such consumers can be defined as sustainable. They are primarily characterized by internalizing the ethical standards and values related to the SD concept. They take sustainable actions prompted by the inner belief that this is right and necessary, even at the expense of personal limitations. At the same time, they have sufficient means of pressure on other important market players in the form of a purchasing fund and electoral powers. The internalization of the values of sustainable development by the critical mass of sustainable consumers would make it possible to change the general awareness of the majority of society.

The recognition by every consumer of *natural duties* in the area of sustainable consumption is equal to initiating the transformation of his/her consumption model into a sustainable one. However, joint actions of sustainable consumers over time lead to the emergence of increasingly stronger institutional forms that work for SC in accordance with Rawls' *obligations*.[10]

Currently, the sustainable consumer pattern can be described by the following main features:

- awareness of consumer rights and the impact of consumption choices on social, ecological and economic problems;
- high level of social responsibility, which means, among others, being guided by such values as: intra and intergenerational justice, democracy, cooperation, peaceful conflict resolution, respect for people and nature;
- care for the dematerialization of the process of satisfying needs that includes, above all (1) giving up 'excess' goods, consistent with the belief that only basic biological needs require the use of natural resources, (2) respect for natural resources, including the frugal use of electricity, gas, water and objects, (3) a critical approach to promotional messages awakening new material desires and fashions created by producers to increase sales,
- consumption of sustainable goods and services,
- giving up the consumption of unsustainable goods and services,
- engaging in the activities of the sustainable consumerism movement and demanding that the state introduces systemic solutions to facilitate a socially responsible lifestyle.

Sustainable consumer implements in everyday choices all three strategic paths of SD economics, namely: (1) an efficiency strategy – in the absence of sustainable products, choose products that need fewer resources, (2) a cohesion strategy – replace conventional products with their sustainable counterparts, (3) a sufficiency strategy – a voluntary change of the consumption model and lifestyle to the sustainable one.

[10] In recent years there has been more research on consumption in a wider context of SD, evidently opposed to the ideology of contemporary consumerism, cf. (Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Bylok, 2014; Dedeoglu & Kazancoglu, 2012; Jastrzębska-Smolaga, 2000; Kiełczewski, 2007, 2015; Kryk, 2011; Lewicka-Strzałecka, 2003; Miao, 2011; Pieńkowski, Murawska, & Zaremba-Warnke, 2018).

In addition to the first two strategic paths, this means, first of all, a reduction in material consumption (including resource consumption) in favour of intangible (spiritual values) and a commitment to institutional activities for SD.

It is worth emphasizing that the transformation of the consumption model into the sustainable one rarely happens in a revolutionary manner - it is an evolutionary change. The concept of *a sustainable consumer* should be treated as a dynamic model that will undoubtedly undergo some modifications along with the changing socio-economic environment.

The primary condition for changing the consumption model to the sustainable one, in both individual and institutional terms, is the internalisation of SD values by every consumer. This internalization means above all (1) an internal, strong belief that SD values are a priority for achieving a better quality of life, (2) assuming responsibility for the effects of one's consumption and recognizing personal obligations towards society and nature, and (3) successive changes of one's consumption model according to the daily motto: *what else can I do to make my consumption and life style more sustainable?*

The internalization of SD values requires first of all: (1) knowledge of how the implementation of SD assumptions (including SC) affects the quality of life in the individual and social dimensions (2) understanding the complexity of SD problems (including SC), and especially the clash of SD values with other values that are important for the consumer (3) knowledge of what should be done for SD individually and in the scope of system solutions (4) a pro-social attitude (5) options for action, and (6) motivation (both lower-level motivation – the sense of danger, linking the idea of SD to physiological needs and higher-level motivation – the sense of duty, responsibility, human community, self-realization). Thus, internalizing SD values is not an easy or a fast process.

Furthermore a sustainable consumer is aware that individually he/she is not able to make the positive system changes necessary for the widespread implementation of SC. Therefore, from the second half of the 20th century, the SC movement has been developing, and evolved based on ecological and ethical consumerism. The sustainable consumerism movement combines both approaches, ecological and ethical, taking into account the overall impact of consumption on nature and society, namely: relationships with other people, impact on health, protection of employees' rights and dignity, amount of employees' wages, protection of animals, environmental protection, supporting participatory democracy, positive impact on local communities, responsible marketing etc. (Kiełczewski, 2008, pp. 192-196; Lewicka-Strzałecka, 2003).

The sustainable consumerism movement is made up primarily of consumer organizations (e.g. Consumers International), environmental and SD organizations (e.g. Greenpeace, WWF, Polska Zielona Sieć) and organizations responsible for social responsibility (e.g. the World Fair Trade Organization). In addition to these major organizations, every player in socio-economic life can support the

consumerism movement. Educational institutions, local governments, socially responsible enterprises, ministries, European Union institutions and the media are becoming increasingly involved in SC-oriented activities. The purpose of these activities is to educate consumers and producers and to balance production and consumption (Pieńkowski et al., 2018, p. 57).

The activities of the sustainable consumerism movement can be divided into the following main groups (Zaremba-Warnke, 2012):

- **Educational and information activities in the field of SC**, including providing consumers with reliable and precise information (e.g. publications of product tests and nature pollution level[11], information on sustainable products labelling, mobile applications, e.g. *GoodGuide.Com*, websites and social media on SD[12]);
- **Changing consumer behaviour through**, among others, **lifestyle change programs** e.g., Eco-Team Program[13], Greenteams, Schools for Earth, responsible consumption campaigns (e.g. "Buy Responsibly," "Car Free Day," "Clean Up the World"), encouraging consumers to join in the *slow*[14] and *Fair Trade* movements, encouraging participation in boycotts of socially harmful companies (e.g. boycotts organized by Greenpeace and Ethical Consumers);
- **Unification of labelling and certification methods and of product and socially responsible company testing**; e.g. the unification of ecolabelling conducted by *the Global Ecolabelling Network*, coordinating the cooperation of organizations testing products on an international scale by *International Consumer Research & Testing*;
- **Developing producers' social responsibility, including the promotion of socially responsible companies**, among others, producer programs implemented by the Fundacja Partnerstwo dla Środowiska (Environmental Partnership Foundation) activities of the Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu (Responsible Business Forum); the *Global Reporting Initiative*, *UN Global Compact*, AAA Standards, EMAS Standards etc.;
- **Supporting the development of sustainable product markets** – e.g. supporting the cooperation of organic farmers and sustainable tourism entities from a given region; consumer organizations running their enterprises in which economic, ecological and social goals are treated equally, and the profit is partially allocated to the implementation of statutory activities for SD, which allows consumer organizations to become independent of external financing[15];

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[11] See such publications as Öko-Test Magazine, Pro-Test, Greenpeace Nachrichten.

[12] E.g. greenpeace.org, www.footprintnetwork.org, www.ekonsument.pl, www.ethicalconsumer.org, www.pro-test.pl.

[13] For more on the Eco-Team Program see (*Przewodnik dla…*, 1996).

[14] For more on the *slow* movement see (Kiełczewski, 2009).

[15] E.g. the activities of the Fundacja Polska Farma Ekologiczna „Ecofarma" (Polish Ecological Farm Foundation "Ecofarm", http://www.ecofarma.comweb.pl).

- **Defending consumer rights** – e.g. representing consumers by consumer organizations in court proceedings and helping consumers by means of the Consumer Protection Ombudsman;
- **Lobbying for systemic changes, including the creation of political parties working for SD** – with a view to legal changes that facilitate SD, e.g. the cessation of the subsidization of poisonous solutions, the *Global Forest Coalition* and GMO-free Campaigns.[16]

It is worth noting that, despite the different types of sustainable consumerism actions, they are all subordinated to the overarching values of SD, namely social responsibility and intra and intergenerational justice. However, the effectiveness of the sustainable consumerism movement depends mainly on addressing the causes of the intention-behaviour gap. The more that sustainable consumerism leaders are aware of the barriers faced by the implementation of sustainability standards and the conflict between the central values of SD and other consumer-relevant values, the more effectively they can create sustainable consumption programs that achieve the intended objectives in the target audience. This is due to the fact that a decisive role in undertaking sustainable consumption activities is played by psycho-sociological variables, such as norms and individual values, attitudes, opinions and beliefs, closely correlated with the level of consumer knowledge (Cotte & Trudel, 2009; Vermeir & Verbecke, 2006).

Thus a sustainable consumer who has internalized SD values should definitely be distinguished from consumers who undertake sustainable activities under the influence of other motives, e.g. snobbishness, or economic under the influence of regulatory mechanisms embedded in the socio-economic system.

The economic motives of sustainable actions generally do not lead to lasting behavioural changes and last as long as the incentives trigger them. Yet, a permanent behaviour change is linked to an internal belief that this should be done for the sake of intra and intergenerational justice, and hence it results from the acceptance of the ethics of duty (Filek, 2004, p. 7). However, it would be naïve to expect all citizens to live following the principles of SD voluntarily and due to their internal conviction. Therefore, economic incentives and other systemic solutions which remove the barriers to SD and make it profitable for socio-economic actors to take sustainable measures, regardless of their internal belief, are necessary for the universal implementation of SD.

4. Conclusion

In order to avoid a drastic deterioration in the quality of life of present and future generations, systemic changes for SD are necessary. In a market economy and democracy, the sustainable consumerism movement based on the ethics of duty and

[16] See e.g.: pinterest.com/weaddup/join-gmo-free-campaign/; www.polskawolnaodgmo.org; www.greenpeace.de/presse/publikationen/studie-10-klimaschaedliche-subventionen-im-fokus.

the overarching values of the SD concept of social responsibility as well as intra and intergenerational justice, can be the initiator of positive systemic changes towards SD. However, sustainable consumers must become a sufficiently large group to achieve the *critical mass* capable of triggering a global change favouring SD in society. Given that, despite the gradual development of the sustainable consumerism movement, the realization of SD values seems to be too slow concerning the growing problems of the modern world, and thus it can be claimed that the *critical mass* of sustainable consumers has not yet been achieved.

The reason for this being that the full internalization of the values of SD is a process of time-consuming and evolutionary changes, and it also collides with serious socio-economic barriers such as the prevailing model of unsustainable consumption and the barrenness of democracy, including problems with building a knowledge-based civil society and readiness to 'get involved'.

Therefore, issues related to the internalization of SD values and norms require further in-depth research. It seems essential to find answers to questions on the size of the critical mass of sustainable consumers, the declared and real fundamental values of sustainable consumers, the type and strength of existing barriers to sustainable consumption, and the instruments that can be used to facilitate the internal transformation of consumer awareness, in line with the ethical standards of SD.

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DEONTOLOGICZNE ASPEKTY ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ KONSUMPCJI

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest określenie roli deontologii w realizacji zrównoważonego rozwoju (ZR) oraz pokazanie, w jaki sposób konsumenci kierujący się etyką obowiązku mogą stać się inicjatorem powszechnych zmian na rzecz ZR. Artykuł został opracowany na podstawie badań jakościowych. Podkreślono w nim, że koncepcja ZR jest silnie uwarunkowana aksjologicznie, a szczególną rolę implementacyjną odgrywa deontologia. Internalizacja wartości moralnych ZR jest kluczowym warunkiem realizacji ZR na poziomie zarówno makroekonomicznym, jak i mikroekonomicznym, czyli zarządzania przedsiębiorstwem i decyzji konsumenckich. Autorzy artykułu wskazują, że w gospodarce rynkowej, w dobie globalizacji, inicjatorami powszechnych i ewolucyjnych zmian na rzecz ZR mogą stać się konsumenci, kierujący się etyką obowiązku i wspierający ruch zrównoważonego konsumeryzmu. W artykule scharakteryzowano główne działania ruchu zrównoważonego konsumeryzmu oraz bariery spowalniające rozwój tego ruchu.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, deontologia zrównoważonej konsumpcji, zrównoważony konsumeryzm, zrównoważone zarządzanie, społeczeństwo obywatelskie.