Psychosocial risks and sustainable development policies

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Abstract. In the context of social policies and of sustainable development strategies, the fair distribution of opportunities among generations, combating poverty and social exclusion, promoting equal chances and equity as regards capital and income distribution are essential goals. The “health” term is as relevant as that of “safety” in ensuring wellbeing. The research of stress as a specific and alarming phenomenon of present-day society reveals hard to solve social issues and that is why the subject is quite frequently avoided. EU strategies and policies prove the importance of European initiatives in preventing health issues and promoting health in the context of sustainable, intelligent and inclusive development. Keeping employees healthy could increase the length of time spent in full workforce capacity and would thus support the ageing workforce. Therefore, national or global sustainable development strategies must be thoroughly coordinated with the other strategic planning documents aimed at these goals.

Keywords: psychosocial risks, EU policy, sustainable development strategies.

JEL Codes: O16; J24; Z13

1. Introduction

Technological progress and globalization have inaugurated apparently endless opportunities in the working environment, continued by enormous changes in the nature of society itself. Long-term structural changes and the current economic crisis have brought about increasing pressure upon the employers and the employees to stay competitive, economic insecurity generating a feeling of continuous uncertainty and psychosocial pressure. Structural, organizational and technological changes in the working environment have also led to disorders in the employees’ work-life balance.

Sustainable development strategies place the human being at their centre, while social inclusion of individuals through participation in the social and cultural life, education, culture and civic spirit, transparency and effectiveness of decisions, diplomacy are strategic landmarks. This entails the “concerted efforts of all social actors and generating and strengthening latent synergies in all the components of the social system and of the natural environment”. (Ciupagea et al., 2006)

An intensification of concerns related to raising the level of “wellbeing at work” can be noticed at a European level, both among the employees and the employers, which is “a summative concept characterizing the quality of professional life, including aspects concerning safety and health in the workplace, which can

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be a major determining factor of productivity at an individual level, at a company level and at all social levels implicitly." (Schulte, Vainio, 2010)

Keeping a population healthy and active for a longer time has a positive impact upon productivity and competitiveness.

2. Stress – a multifactorial result of changes in the social and organizational environment

From the viewpoint of the laws of Physics, the term of stress designates the response of an object that is inert in its structure and is triggered by an external force, and the result is a physical change in that object, which will modify its volume, shape or size (this change being measurable). The terms of stress or stressor have been turned from highly accurate physical concepts into various biological concepts which have often been neither testable nor quantifiable. Gradually, it has become a “major interdisciplinary concept” reflecting the “adaptation issues imposed by the difficult life circumstances”, being adopted in biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, philosophy, ecology, associating the concepts of conflict, frustration, traumatism, alienation, anxiety, depression, emotional suffering, which demonstrates the complexity of the phenomenon (Lazarus, 1999).

The science of stress has provided a conceptual framework for the analysis and adaptation to political systems, to pressures on the environment and personal experiences that have modelled the system and the rhythm of life (Jackson, 2013).

Having become a unifying concept that designates the interaction between organic life and the environment, stress draws attention to the physiological and psychological tensions exerted upon the human body by challenges in the perpetually moving environment. Changes create opportunities, but are also accompanied by a warning: risks not only multiply, but they grow exponentially. In recent years, there have appeared reasons for concern as to the unitary response of the human mind and body when faced with such major external changes or strains. Modern societies are affected by specific degenerative conditions that physiologists and pathologists have explained by establishing connections between pressures on the environment and human pathologies.

The notions of stress or stressor have only a metaphorical relationship with physical concepts; the same terms being employed at present in social sciences studying the constraints that individuals, nations or even various national and international institutions have to face, contexts in which they appear, sometimes leaving the impression that they are hyperbolae rather than scientific concepts.

In the current age, stress has imposed itself as an integrating term referring both to the human being and to the biological, social and economic system, an operational concept in the biomedical, social, economic, environmental and ecological sciences. If one were to add to what has already been said that relationships between people as well as man’s relationship with himself has become uncertain starting from and because of the current type of economic growth; that the extremely fast mutations it triggers in daily life, unbalancing professional and geographic mobility, uprooting large numbers of people attracted by the great urban agglomerations are causing deep psychological disorders, one will understand why the excrescences and “residues” of the current type of growth are subject to harsh criticism (Pohoata I., 2009).

3. Changes in the socioeconomic environment and increasing psychosocial risks

Sustainable development conceptualization was imposed by the need to theoretically define the response to the economic and ecological crisis that the world was undergoing at the end of the 20th century, which
carried on into the 21st century. All research converged upon the idea that there is a strong interacting relationship between economic development and the state of the environment, on the one hand, and mental health on the other hand.

An increased level of workforce occupation and quality jobs are be connection between the economic and social dimension of sustainable development and it can be quantified by means of the GDP and occupation level as primary macroeconomic indicators, but also through the people’s health index, the latter being regarded as a long-term workforce reservoir.

The social pillar of sustainable development refers to a complex system of indicators related to living standard and life quality, social wellbeing and a person’s education and comfort level. The indicators below are particularly relevant:

1. people under poverty and social exclusion risk
2. average life expectancy at birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region/ Countries</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% out of the total population) - 2012</th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth - years – 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU 28</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td></td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Relevant indicators of the sustainable development social pillar
Source: Eurostat

There is a relative correlation between the index of persons with risk of poverty and social exclusion and life expectancy. But is some underdeveloped economically and socially regions who have high life hopes.

The civilization has come "bundled" with pollution and especially with stress and this generated unadapted social groups with rapidly decreasing life expectancy.

The concepts of individual’s adaptation to the dynamics of economic and social development have included all the individual requirements which must meet to be part of the medium and upper social class.

Unadapted cohabitation people (at risk of poverty and social exclusion) in a society in constant development, in the lack of measures to help them, lead to major health problems and ultimately lead to shortened life expectancy.

Must be considered how society, with his development has created mechanisms, institutions, strategies to compensate the negative effects of economic and social progress (pollution and stress), but access to these is based on the economic strength of individuals or assisting disadvantaged people.
The gap between Romania and the mean value of the other European countries concerning life expectancy at birth can be justified through the low living standard. The percentages of people under risk of poverty and social exclusion are indirectly proportional to those considering life expectancy.

The indicator concerning people under risk of poverty and social exclusion reflects an unfavourable position for Romania, compared to the EU average-28. As concerns average life expectancy at birth, Romania’s gap compared to the EU average-28 was 6.5 years for men and 4 years for women in 2012.

The crisis is the major effect of reducing activities in various economic and social sectors, which, as a result, led to a rise in the number of unemployed people in general and of youth under 25 in particular.

What raises special concern is the increased unemployment level among youth, the crisis amplifying this phenomenon.

As can be noticed, the people’s occupation increase rate is very low both in Romania and as a European average. In this context, due to the lack of sustained job increase measures taken after consulting specialists in order to avoid unwanted social effects, it will be impossible to reach the 2020 target. A solution to increase formal employment of the population could be to encourage the transition from the informal to the formal sector. This can be made considering the two major ways of action: the way of economic sanctions against individuals and entities who seek to profit illegally from certain advantages, and the second way which is based on the concept of prevention and should be applied especially when legislative measures are inadequate or the system is marked by too much inertia in reforms (Pisica S. et al., 2012).

The EU policy of promoting “active third age” points out the fact that the negative impact of the crisis upon elderly people’s occupation was not as strong as that which affected the employees in other age groups, in the sense that no marked increases of the indicator were recorded.
One must also note that in Romania this rate is only 41.5%, much lower than the average EU rate of 50.1%, which requires another gap to be bridged in future.

For the year 2020, the sub-occupation target established at the EU-28 level is 75%, and for Romania 70%.

Although the unemployment rate has an overall lower value in Romania, youth included, in comparison with other countries, we consider it to stand at a very high level, especially among youth, which does not mean only a human capital squandering and low life quality, but also an additional factor of social tension, unemployment and immigration acceleration.
The two defining elements of the human community, interhuman relationships with an affective charge and attachment to certain cultural values rely on the existence of consensus, but also on the conflict as part of a continuous change process. Thus, contemporary societies and communities are much more democratic and more moderate in comparison with those of the past, but they fail to provide equality among their members, which is not actually desirable, since it acts against effectiveness and productivity. At the same time, growing inequity tends to undermine not only societal relations, but also the democratic societies elements seen as a community of communities.

Another consequence of inequity is migration as a means of searching for a better life than in the country of origin by those who consider themselves wronged and excluded from communities based on various criteria (race, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation) or who seek more profitable jobs that ensure their desired social prestige. The workforce leaving Romania is a loss that widens the gap between the potential and the real GDP in our country and the economic and social gap compared to other countries. The solution of emerging from the crisis does not consist in laying off ever larger staff figures, but on the contrary, in creating new jobs that could counterbalance the effects of employees being laid off and of other destabilizing crisis phenomena.

In classic modernity man’s individual goal was to provide himself with a profession based on his personal education and training acquired at a young age. Family and school are institutions that transmit cultural codes, but the inequity is obvious in access to these codes as well. Cultural competence inequities arise. Social privilege is or should be determined by natural endowment, culture and education. In the current stage, “globalization stands at the centre of modern culture; cultural practices stand in the centre of globalization”. Recent studies stress the autonomy of culture in relation with social structure, as a structure in itself, but this approach itself differs from one social system to another. Cultural phenomena intermingle, from law codes to religious rituals, to art and intellectual ideas. That is why globalization is perceived by each of us, in our daily existence, as a complex of ample modernization metamorphoses, in the basic sense of moving from the old to the new.

4. Strategic approach to psychosocial risks in the context of sustainable development

The response to social risks and social costs exacerbated by globalization marked a change of paradigm at the level of world politics, taking shape through an ample cooperation movement at an international level.

Sustainable development is deeply rooted in the concept of fundamental social rights. Accordingly, fighting poverty and increasing living standards, promoting equal chances and equity as regards capital and income distributions are the main goals of any sustainable development strategy. Since social wellbeing (established by society according to political criteria) is not the simple sum of individual wellbeing’s, economic policies are therefore meant to combine the efficiency of the market economy system with non-economic goals (solidarity, cohesion, equity). Negative externalities (resource depletion, biodiversity reduction, pollution, poverty, social alienation, inequity, development gaps) have incessantly increased social costs, both internally and internationally. Pursuing the desideratum of economic growth as a requirement of development led to the widening of social inequities with negative consequences upon public health as well. Economic growth does not automatically result in wellbeing and social cohesion. Externalities of economic activities are mirrored in the impact they generate upon the environment (in a wide sense), but also upon the groups of people through social cost.

In conclusion, in the context of economic development moving on to sustainable development means turning man and nature from means into goals. And even though this might involve additional costs, and a
lower productivity respectively, this can be compensated through additional benefits regarding the quality of life. The factors that could contribute to reaching the goals of sustainable development are: the free market, state intervention within certain limits, international bodies, all this supported by a factor of paramount importance: education.

As far as quantity is concerned, it is important to take stock of and measure these variables both as regards potential and as regards necessities in relation with economic activity. At the same time, sustainable development involves meeting certain balance requirements: between various components of the terrestrial biosystem, between the environment and economy, between population size, environmental tolerability and economic activity level, between working and living conditions of various population categories (social equity and justice), between the level of consumption and environment quality, between the satisfaction degree of present and future needs.

As far as quality is concerned, it is necessary to identify realistic practical solutions that could be applied easily, at the level of all companies and businesses and of the whole population and that would ensure: living standard growth, bridging gaps and enhancing social equity, increasing the volume and quality of usable natural resources, increasing environment tolerability, enhancing the efficiency of employing natural capital, diminishing technological impact upon the environment.

As regards the mental dimension of the problem under discussion, it has to be approached on two levels: that of the individual mental and that of the collective mental, the latter not being the sum of individual mental.

With reference to this dimension, what should be done is mental reconstruction, by means of coherent education, alongside with economy restructuring or even a preamble of that.

EU strategies and policies prove the importance of European initiatives in preventing health issues and promoting mental health (Fig 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>European Pact For Mental Health and Well Being (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Strategy on Health and Safety at Work (2007 to 2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Together for Health: A strategic approach (2008-2013)</td>
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<td>Europe 2020 (2010)</td>
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Fig. 5 Relevant policy in the EU in preventing health issues and promoting mental health

Source: Adapted from the Economic analysis of workplace mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programmes, Final report, May 2013

**Lisbon Strategy on Growth and Jobs (2005)**

Its goals refer to skill improvement, professional insertion capacity and workforce adaptability, as well as promoting the operation of workforce markets in the EU, including a wider participation of those
population groups that are facing difficulties and might be excluded from the labour market. This also includes promoting and maintaining good mental health and wellbeing at work in the EU.

**European Pact for Mental Health and Well Being (2008)**

Five key-domains in which decision factors and interested parties all over the EU should take measures:

- mental health of the youth and education;
- mental health of the elderly;
- mental health at work;
- preventing depression and suicide;
- approaching stigmatization and social exclusion

**Community Strategy on Health and Safety at Work (2007 to 2012)**

This emphasized the importance of health aimed at obtaining quality and productivity at work. It requires a change towards preventive organizational culture, including mental health promotion at work as a priority.

**Together for Health: A strategic approach (2008-2013)**

It points out the need to promote the employees’ health condition owing to the cost of decreasing productivity in the workplace due to psychological conditions.

**Europe 2020**

The main goals of this new policy are: increasing the workforce occupation rate (75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed by 2020) and promoting healthy and active ageing in order to allow for social cohesion and higher productivity.


It defines research priorities in the field of security and health at work (SHW) throughout 2013-2020. It provides the data needed to prepare a possible SHW strategy of the European Union as part of the Framework research Programme in accordance with the 2020 Europe Strategy and with the Horizon 2020 Programme, 2014-2020 Strategy.

5. **Conclusions**

Measures and policies of inserting youth onto the labour market are one of the major issues that decision-making authorities should solve in order to give substance to the sustainability of economic growth and cooperation among generations. Employing youth on the job market is a key problem of sustainable development strategy in Romania that calls for measures both in the sector of education and training and in that of the public-private partnership on both an educational plane and on that of youth employment stimulation.

Another issue raising many question marks and dilemmas deals with retirement age and the potential contribution of senior citizens to emergence from the crisis. In the opinion of many specialists, it is necessary to make a serious and responsible review of the positive effects that policies promoting an “active third age” would bring to Romania through granting the workforce over 65 years of age, especially the highly qualified one with the necessary expertise, the opportunity to work.

All countries resorted to austerity measures during the crisis, both through salary limitations or decreases, and through staff being made redundant in the public and private sectors, granting taxation facilities alongside with increasing income or fortune tax etc.

It is noteworthy for the situation Romania has recorded over the past few years that laying off staff, which is one of the short-term “easy and superficial methods” of increasing apparent social productivity of labour has serious long-term consequences. Such long-term effects have not been considered by certain
decisive factors concerned with the short-term problem solving aspects. Another unfavourable consequence of staff being made redundant, as a result of anti-crisis measures applied in Romania, consisted in employing poorly or improperly qualified staff due to the lack of adequately qualified workforce. The general reduction of personnel and costs without a clear strategic vision as regards effects, medium- and long-term imbalances did nothing else but bring unprecedented psychosocial pressure.

The measures of anti-crisis policies taken did not result in an emergence from recession and crisis. On the contrary, they prolonged economic-financial disorders and imbalances and diminished living standards, with implications upon sustainable economic growth.

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7. References

accessed at 5 September 2014
