



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT - MANAGERS' AWARENESS, INFLUENCE ON FUNCTIONING SMALL AND MEDIUM- SIZED ENTERPRISES IN POLAND

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Abstract

The negative impact of economic development led to the emergence of a new concept, which has been termed sustainable development. It has significantly influenced the way of thinking about relations occurring in the social, economic, and environmental areas. There are many definitions of this concept in literature. Effective implementation of the principles of this concept requires understanding and building environmental awareness. Implementation of the concept at the enterprise level requires managers to have a certain amount of knowledge and skills and at the same time the ability to perceive and look at the issue of sustainable development from the perspective of benefits. The paper presents the results of a study conducted in 2021 among 216 managers of small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland. The research aimed to assess the awareness of the idea of sustainability among the management staff of small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland and its impact on their functioning. The results of the research were compared to the results of research conducted by the author in 2008. The research has shown a significant increase in the awareness of the idea of sustainable development. This applies both to the everyday behaviors of respondents and declared actions carried out in enterprises they manage. The main factor motivating the surveyed companies to undertake pro-environmental actions is the conviction that it is necessary to care for the environment and not to avoid paying fines and fees. The respondents see specific benefits from such activities.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s and 1970s, various circles in the international arena began to recognize the negative impact of economic development on the environment. It was then that the concept of sustainable development was born. Sustainable development is perceived internationally as a leading trend in social, economic, and environmental development - both in macro and microeconomic terms (Wisniewska, 2021).

The idea of sustainable development emerged as an attempt to provide an answer to the set of threats that were perceived in the 1960s in the predicted high demographic growth, rapid consumption of natural resources, increasing environmental pollution, failure to meet the basic needs of increasingly large groups of people and deep destabilization of natural and socio-economic systems (Zablocki, 2002). This concept played a huge role in the second half of the 20th century in shaping the way of thinking about mutual relations between society, economy, and natural environment resources (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2005). There are many definitions of sustainable development in the literature. These definitions can be grouped into three approaches:

- nature-based approach, the primary goal of sustainable development is to ensure the integrity of ecosystems, maintaining their vitality,
- economic approach - includes the use and conservation of resources to create sustainable value through their optimal use and restoration,
- civilization approach, the social component of sustainable development is human-centered; it is aimed at maintaining the stability of social and cultural systems (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2005, Ksonzzyk et al., 2021).

Poland, as one of many countries, has adopted the concept of sustainable development as the basis of its environmental policy. The implementation of this concept in Poland requires taking action, proposing solutions, and allocating specific sums for investment in individual sectors of the economy (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2007). The state has several economic instruments at its

disposal, through which it can influence enterprises, shaping their pro-ecological behavior.

Table 1. Definitions of sustainable development

Author (year)	Definition
Kuszczyk, 2020	People are responsible for the welfare of contemporary and future generations. The implementation of the commitment requires cautious and lasting use of the natural environment.
Urbaniec, 2016	A change in management manner takes into account a systemic and integrated approach of an interdisciplinary character.
Kolodko, 2014	A new trend of social and economic development throughout the world.
Burchard-Dziubinska, 2014	The best possible way to arrange the modern world, allowing sustainable and equitable development of human society, both on a global and local scale.
Boris, 2011	A process directed at meeting developmental targets of the current generation in a manner that allows implementation of the same needs by next generations.
Mayeda, 2004	Principle of shared but differentiated responsibility and caution.
Our Common Future: Report from the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987 Our Common Future: Report from the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987	The development process (of countries, cities, businesses, communities) that unconditionally connects the needs of the present generation with the ability to meet the needs of future generations, as well as the needs of some people with the needs of others.

Source: (Wisniewska, 2021).

The economic tools used in environmental protection include:

- charges - amounts paid for environmental pollution,
- subsidies - various forms of financial assistance for the implementation of established conservation tasks, for example, non-refundable grants, tax reliefs, preferential loans,
- deposit schemes - price subsidies for products that are potentially harmful to the environment,
- the creation of an allowance market - the artificial creation of markets in which economic operators trade permits for current or future emissions or use of a given resource,
- financial incentives for enforcement - fines for exceeding emission standards and other environmental regulations (Ramczyk, 2020).

showed, as many as 86% of the representatives of the surveyed companies believe that their enterprises do not harm the environment at all or have an insignificant impact (Program, 2005). At the same time, representatives of these companies see the possibility of taking actions that will be beneficial both for the environment and for their enterprises.

Sustainable development is present in the discussion in China, with media, government, and foreign agencies exerting pressure for change in this direction. Managers of Chinese enterprises believe that there is sufficient availability of guidelines and practice examples that can help guide and shape individual and institutional sustainability efforts (Demediuk, Garma, 2015).

2 UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Understanding the processes and principles of sustainable development today should be required especially among entrepreneurs and people preparing for managerial roles. It is them who decide or will decide in the future about processes and the way enterprises operate which are important from the point of view of environmental protection. Attitudes, the way they behave daily, and their state of knowledge can be an indicator of how prepared these people are to fulfill responsible social roles, in this case, an entrepreneur, manager, director, etc. (Zuchowski, 2007).

A study conducted by GFK Polonia in cooperation with the Bayer company showed that most Poles are not familiar with the term sustainable development (as many as 60% declared that they do not know it) (Report, 2005). The same study showed that most Poles define their behavior as pro-environmental (77% - the sum of rather yes and definitely yes answers).

Management students, i.e., current, and potential managers and entrepreneurs who have taken the course "Managing sustainable development" are much more familiar with the term "sustainable development" (85%). (85% of respondents declared knowledge) (Zuchowski, 2007).

In 2005, a survey was conducted on the environmental awareness of SME managers. As it

Table 2. Knowledge and skills of a sustainable development leader

Knowledge	Skills
Understand trends related to the main themes of sustainability.	Being a mediator and promoter of sustainability inside and outside the organization, acting as an enthusiastic mentor to interested stakeholders.
In-depth knowledge of the value chain, the socio-environmental impacts in each link, and how to minimize or eliminate them.	Transforming values and beliefs into action plans and more sustainable practices to know how to "make" sustainability a reality in the company.
Mastery of the technical foundations of the field of study sustainability issues, their phenomena, and practical implications.	Communicates sustainable development ideas, objective, direct, authentic, and enthusiastic
Mastery of the technical foundations of the field of study sustainability issues.	Mobilizing different interest groups, attracting supporters, supporters, and supporters for the company's goals, objectives, and activities. the company's sustainability goals, objectives, and projects.
Master the indicators, tools, metrics, and practices that make sustainable management tangible.	Transforming what would be risks to customers into sustainable business opportunities.

Of the many environmental management tools used in Poland, the most popular are:

- clean production,
- organic products,
- environmental management systems (EMS according to ISO 14001, EMAS) (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2007).

4 BENEFITS OF PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR FOR THE COMPANY

Among the benefits resulting from the introduction of environmental management systems, one of the most frequently cited is the reduction of operating costs. The reduction of costs results first and foremost from the rationalization of water, energy, and raw materials consumption. Pro-ecological activities also lead to the reduction of harmfulness and amount of waste and sewage, decrease in gas emission. Thanks to this, the company incurs lower costs related to charges for using the environment or penalties e.g. for exceeding standards.

The benefits of environmental action include:

1. internal benefits:

- economic (cost savings),
- organizational (increase in employee motivation, improvement of relations with pressure groups - customers, authorities),
- increasing innovative capacity.

2 External benefits:

- strengthening market position,
- winning new markets,
- increase in competitiveness. Thanks to these activities and benefits, the company can achieve an increase in efficiency and profitability (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2007).

The company's participation in pro-environmental programs also contributes to shaping its positive image both in the external environment and among employees. Such effects were observed among enterprises participating in the program "Responsibility and Care" (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2006). (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2006).

Small business managers are interested in sustainability, but their activities are dominated by economic interests. Small enterprises are willing to participate in sustainable development

activities, but they prefer short-term benefits and expect economic benefits from these activities. Also, small business managers recognize the importance of environmental protection and other sustainability activities but are not entirely sure whether taking responsibility for sustainability is beneficial or irrelevant to the business. Supporting the attitude of small entrepreneurs towards understanding their responsible behavior for the future can be a challenge not only for enterprises themselves but also for public institutions. Such support may be implemented not only from the educational point of view but above all from the point of view of economic support. This is important because many small businesses have insufficient capital to finance the implementation of sustainable development principles (Mikusova, 2017).

Therefore, a resonant and innovative leader must be able to assess what he/she does, how he/she does it, at what time and with what effort his/her human talent performs its functions, providing him/her with feedback on performance that leads to the improvement of employees' capabilities, skills, and competencies, to achieve high levels of performance-oriented towards the achievement of planned objectives and strategies, contributing to collective well-being, improving the quality of life of society through the production of high-quality goods and services, where social interest outweighs the personal benefit, putting people at the heart of the company, generating competitive advantage and high financial performance for the company.

Sustainable entrepreneurship and innovative leadership also positively influence the sustainability of entire territories (Valle Chirinos-Araque, et al., 2020).

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVE

The research aimed to assess the awareness of the idea of sustainability among the management staff of small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland and its impact on their operations.

The research was conducted using the method of a personal standardized interview in February August 2021 on the territory of the Mazowieckie, Podlaskie, and Warminsko-Mazurskie

voivodeships. The research covered 212 enterprises. The respondents who participated in the survey are the owners of the enterprise and/or act as the president or director or manager. The results of the research have been compared to the results obtained by the author in 2008 (Zuchowski, 2009).

The survey consisted of two substantive parts. Part A dealt with the day-to-day behavior of respondents (who were owners or managers of enterprises) and their knowledge and awareness of the concept of sustainable development. Part B dealt with the actions taken by enterprises in the field of environmental protection, the perception of the necessity of pro-environmental actions, and the impact of these actions on the enterprise. To make the results comparable, the same survey instrument was used as in the 2008 study.

Among the respondents, 17.5% were women and 82.5% were men. Most respondents were aged up to 45 years (57.5%) including those aged 18 to 26 years 7.5%, those aged over 26 years to 35 years 12.7%, and those aged over 35 years to 45 years 37.3%. Respondents aged over 45 to 55 constituted 40.1% of all respondents. The remaining group of respondents was people over 55 years old (2.4%). People participating in the study had higher education - 54.9%, secondary education - 40.2%, and vocational education - 4.9%.

Respondents representing companies held a variety of positions. The largest group were people working as directors or managers (48.6%). Among the respondents, 29.7% were owners of the enterprise and 21.7% were presidents of the surveyed companies. Respondents represented enterprises employing up to 9 people 47.5%, 10 to 50 people 39.1%, 50 to 250 people 12.4% and over 250 people 1.0%. Among the surveyed enterprises 41.0% are manufacturing enterprises and 59.0% are service enterprises. The structure of the surveyed enterprises concerning the number of years of their operation in the market is as follows: up to 5 years - 9.9%, from 5 to 10 years 16.0%, from 10 to 15 years - 31.1%, from 15 to 20 years - 37.3% and over 20 years - 5.7%.

6 DAY-TO-DAY BEHAVIOR OF COMPANY MANAGERS

Respondents as managers have specific social roles and at the same time are responsible for the way companies operate. While performing their managerial functions, they should also take into account the principles of sustainable development and environmental protection in their everyday actions. Such behavior should also be exposed to show the model of an environmentally responsible leader. Manifestations of pro-environmental behavior may indicate the awareness of these persons in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development.

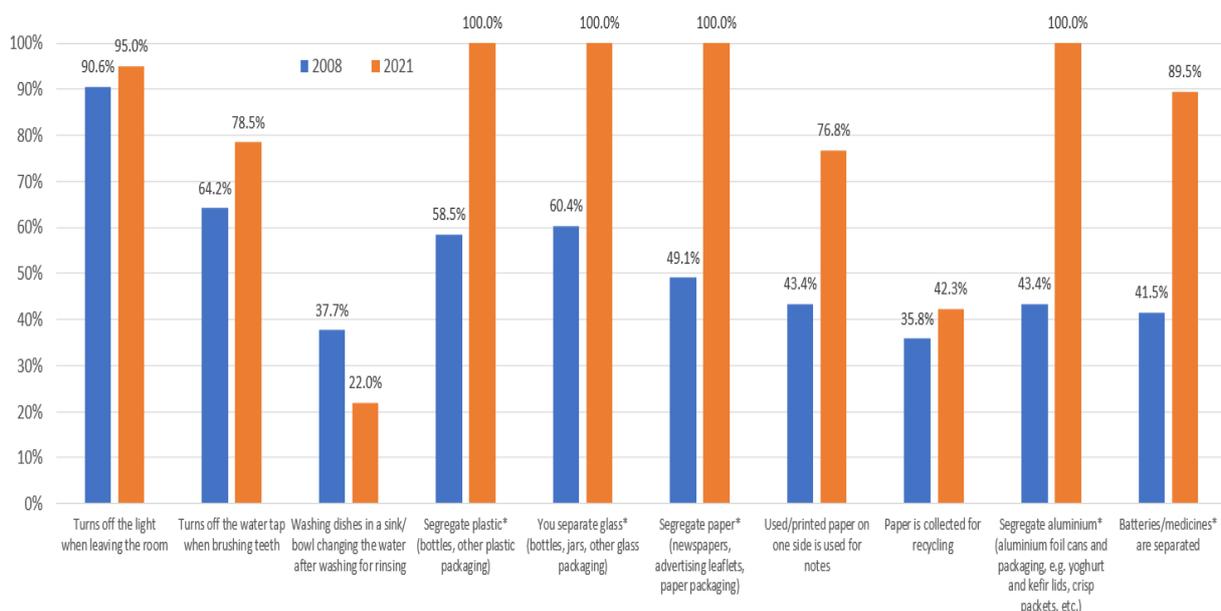


Fig. 2 Activities performed in the households of managers in enterprises

Source: Authors' research

Respondents have indicated activities connected with environment-saving behavior in their households (see Figure 2). As many as 95% of respondents indicated that in their households, they switch off the light after leaving the room. This result is higher than the results of the nationwide survey, where 86% (Report, 2005) of respondents declared such behavior. Moreover, it is also higher than the results of a survey among management students who completed the course 'Managing sustainable development' where such behavior was declared by 95% of respondents (Zuchowski 2007). More than almost 80% of respondents declared that members of their households turn off the tap when brushing their teeth.

All households segregate waste, which is obligatory according to Polish law. Almost 90% of

respondents also segregate batteries and medicines. The results of the survey show that the awareness of respondents is higher, as compared to 2008 results, a higher percentage of respondents declares pro-ecological behavior in their households.

Of the respondents, 100.0% declared that they knew the concept of sustainable development. Such a result indicates that business representatives are much more familiar with the concept of sustainable development than average Poles. Among respondents declaring knowledge of the term sustainable development, 95.0% indicated the correct definition (Figure 3). This result is much higher than in the research conducted in 2008.

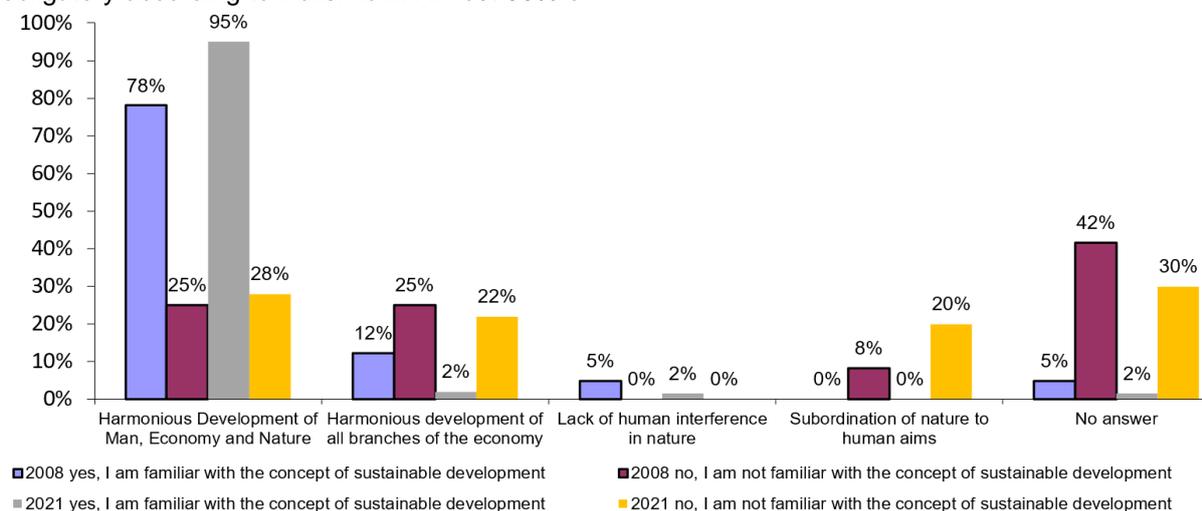


Fig. 3 Familiarity with the concept of sustainable development

Source: Authors' research

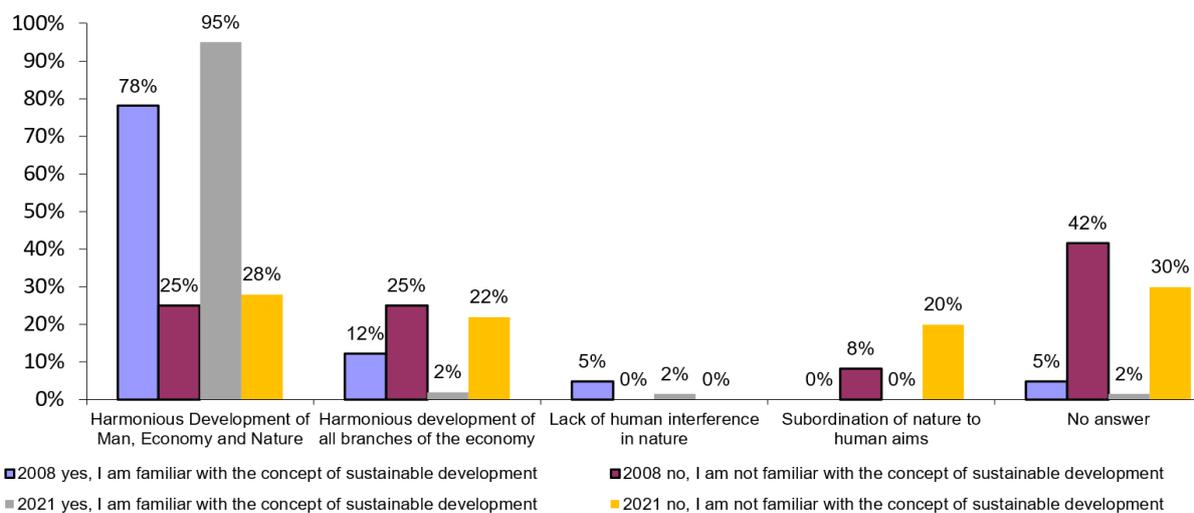


Fig. 4 Respondents' opinion on the impact of their behavior on the environment and the description of their behavior as pro-environmental

Source: Authors' research

All respondents declared that they would know which institution to notify in case of an environmental threat. This result is almost 20% higher than in the 2008 survey. This demonstrates a significant change in the awareness of managers in the SME sector.

Respondents are convinced about the impact of their everyday behavior on the environment (Figure 4). None of the respondents indicated that their everyday behavior does not affect the environment. Respondents also consider their behavior to be pro-environmental. However, only 18,9% of respondents said that their behavior can be considered pro-environmental. None of the respondents indicated "don't know" or "definitely not". The results, compared to those obtained in 2008, indicate an increase in awareness of the behavior of people holding managerial positions in companies.

7 ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE OF COMPANIES.

Companies take some measures to protect the environment. The use of recycling was declared by 79.0% of the surveyed enterprises (Fig. 5). A significant percentage (75.0%) of companies take actions aimed at eliminating the creation of pollution in technological processes. Another activity declared by 47.0% of companies is installing equipment that captures and neutralizes pollutants and in the case of 65.0% of companies' equipment that only captures pollutants is used. Respondents indicated that other pro-environmental activities are also carried out in their enterprises, but they did not specify their type (11.5% of respondents). Comparing the results to those of 2008, one can clearly state that a significantly higher percentage of enterprises undertakes pro-environmental activities.

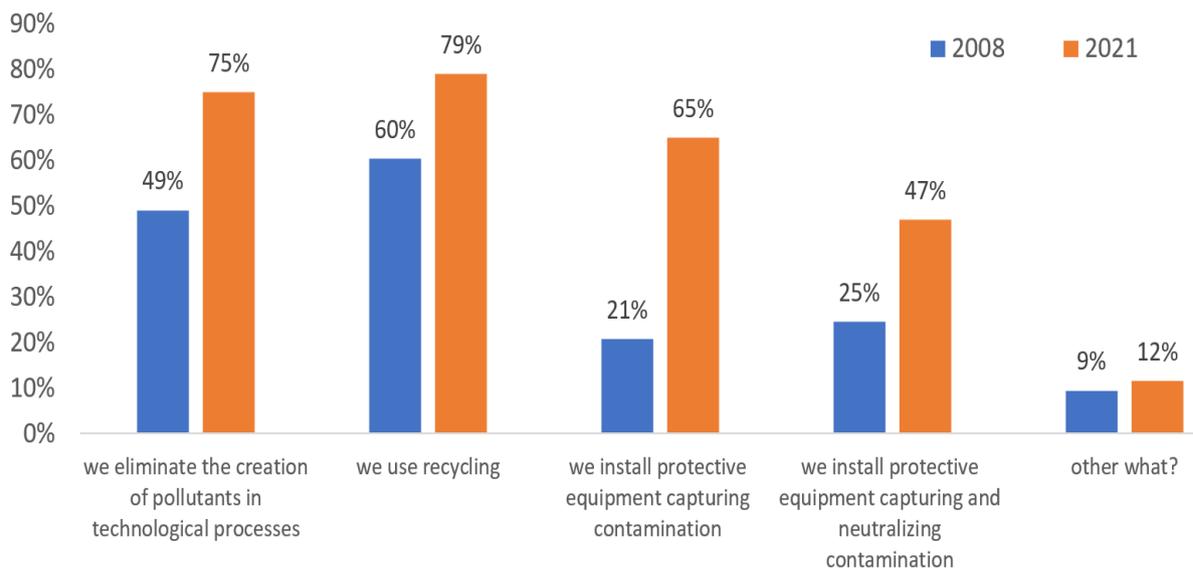


Fig. 5 Pro-environmental actions taken by enterprises

Source: Authors' research

Most of the surveyed enterprise representatives (70.5%) stated that an environmental management system is implemented in their enterprises. Among the activities related to environmental protection, all enterprises have reviewed and complied with legal requirements (Figure 6), and almost 90% of the enterprises keep appropriate documentation. A pro-environmental policy was defined by one third of enterprises. In 28.0% of the surveyed companies, pro-ecological tasks were defined and persons responsible for their implementation were appointed. On the other

hand, 47.0% of companies have measurements and constant monitoring. Internal and external audits are conducted in one third of companies. In 23.5% of the companies, training programs have been prepared and training provided to make employees aware of pro-environmental activities. In 28% of the companies, environmental action programs and targets have been set. In contrast, just over one quarter of the companies have carried out an initial review of the environmental impact of their activities and a review of environmental aspects.

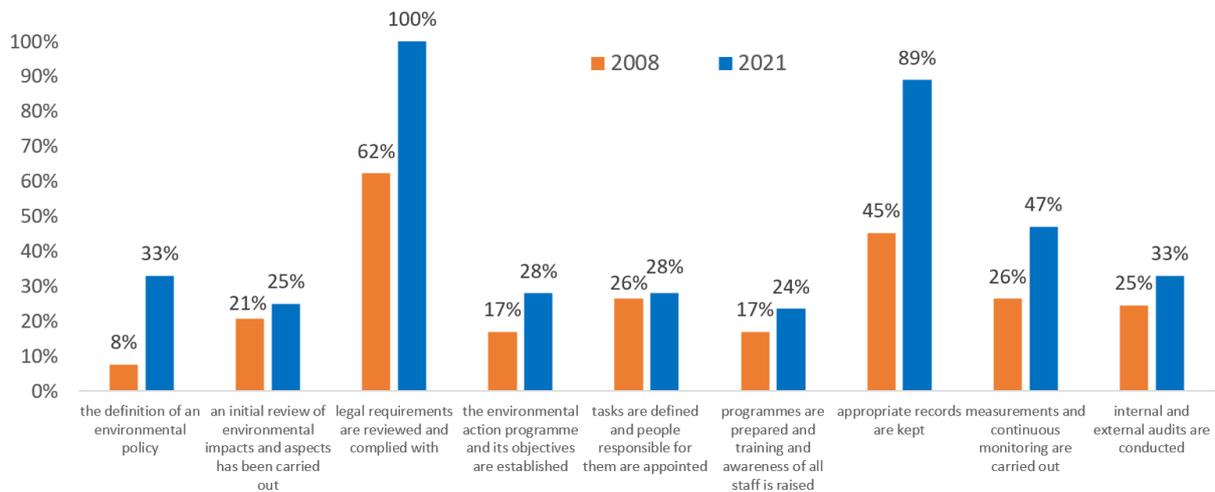


Fig. 6 Measures introduced in enterprises related to environmental protection

Source: Authors' research

The necessity of undertaking pro-environmental actions by enterprises is perceived by their managers as a positive aspect, which is evidenced by the fact that for none of the respondents such actions generate only unnecessary costs. For most respondents, the need to undertake pro-environmental actions is associated with the possibility of obtaining marketing benefits, i.e., improving the image of the company (89.0%), the possibility of acquiring new customers for whom environmental issues are not

indifferent (45.0%) and increasing the competitiveness of the company (68.0%). These activities are also perceived by all respondents as a way not to pay fines. In addition, 55% of respondents perceive these activities as ultimately allowing the company to reduce its operating costs. The perception of pro-environmental actions by the management of enterprises has changed compared to 2008 and indicates a higher awareness of the respondents.

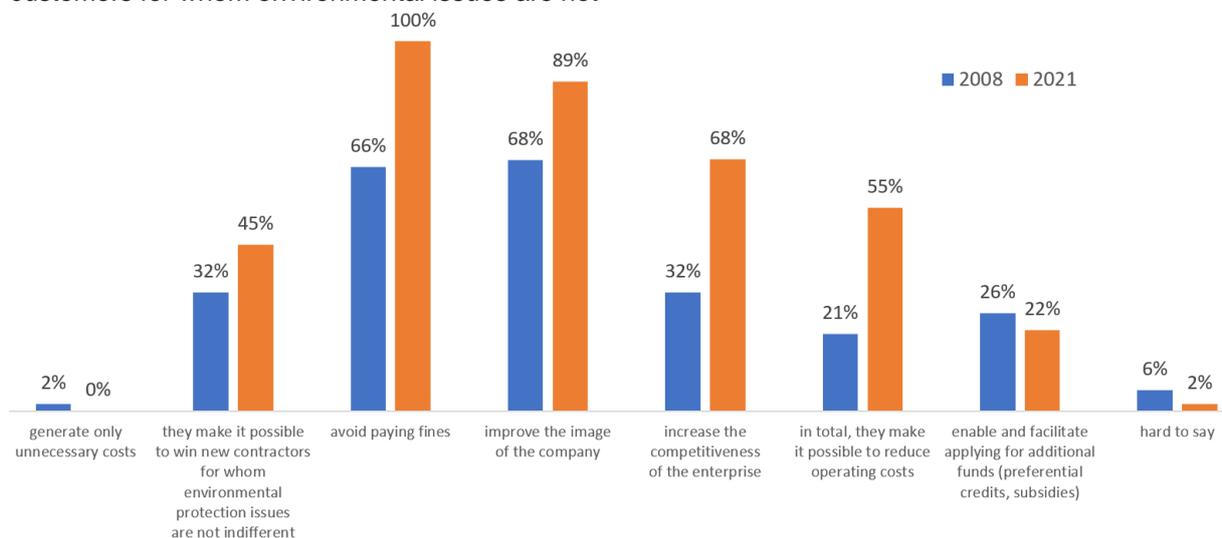


Fig. 7 Perception by managers of the need to undertake pro-environmental activities in enterprises

Source: Authors' research

Among the factors motivating enterprises to undertake pro-environmental actions, the most important is the conviction that one should care for the natural environment (fig. 8). Consumer needs are also an important motivating factor (over 63%

of indications). Companies see a growing group of customers for whom it is important how the goods are produced and whether their production does not harm the natural environment.

The attitude towards the necessity of paying penalties and charges for environmental pollution has changed significantly. Compared to the 2008 results, a significantly lower percentage of respondents indicated this factor as motivating them to undertake pro-environmental activities.

The survey results indicate a significant change in mentality in this respect. The approach to environmental protection has changed from acting just to avoid charges to acting consciously, understanding, and believing in the need to care for the environment.

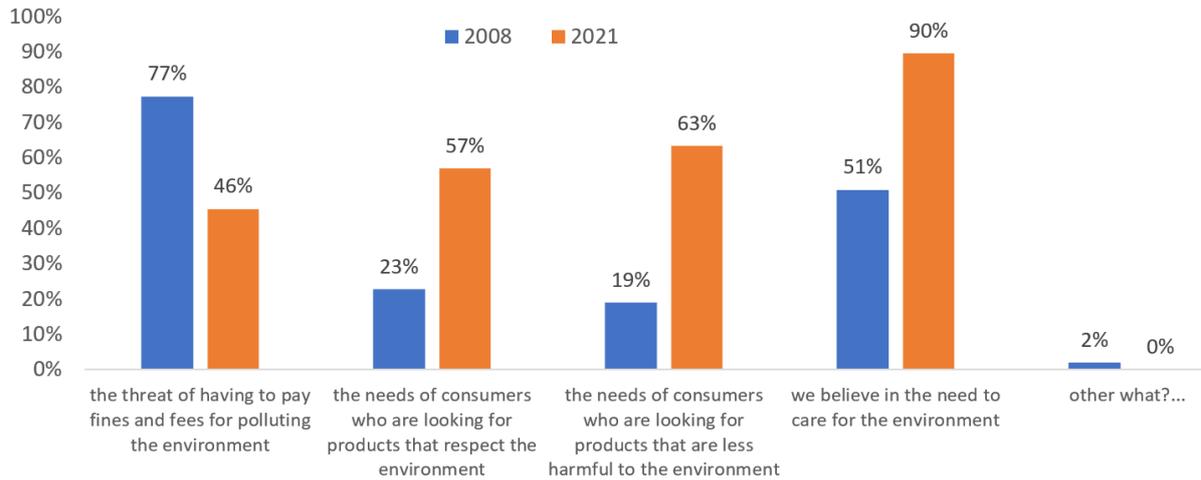


Fig. 8 Factors motivating enterprises to undertake pro-environmental activities

Source: Authors' research

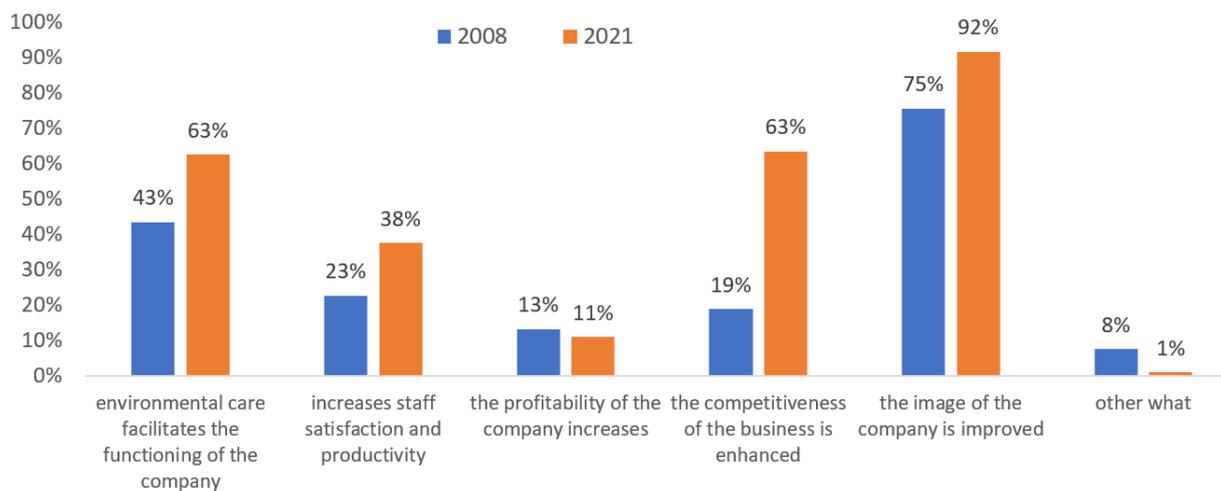


Fig. 9 Benefits resulting from undertaking pro-environmental activities by the enterprise

Source: Authors' research

Undertaking pro-ecological activities, according to the respondents, allows to improve the image of the company (fig. 9) and, as a result, increase its competitiveness. An important aspect, according to 62.5% of respondents, is that such activities make the company's activity easier. Taking up pro-ecological actions allows also for the effect of increased satisfaction and productivity of employees (37.5% of respondents).

8 CONCLUSIONS

Environmentally friendly actions carried out by enterprises require considerable expenditure. On the other hand, their absence relates to other costs associated with the need to pay fees and penalties. The results of the survey allow concluding that abandoning these activities may hurt the image of the company and its competitive position, which is known to the people managing the companies. The comparison of the research results with the results from 2008 indicates that the

understanding of the environmental protection issues by the management has increased. They are more and more convinced that their everyday behavior has an impact on the environment, which is reflected in the way they perceive environmental protection issues in the workplace. Also, the actions taken in the companies managed by these managers and their opinions show that they understand the issues and the importance of pro-environmental actions and the need to implement the principles of sustainable development. Managers perceive pro-environmental activities and the implementation of the idea of sustainable development to increase company effectiveness and profitability.

Research shows that organizations that want to survive in the marketplace and achieve high financial performance in the long term must adopt a strategy that is economically, socially, and

environmentally sustainable. To achieve an appropriate level of sustainability, it is necessary to apply business strategies that satisfy the needs of all parties and at the same time protect, enhance, and develop human and natural resources for the future (Tien et al., 2020). Sustainability, focusing on social and environmental issues, and creating long-term competitiveness are what should distinguish a modern enterprise (Kayachev, Loktionov, 2019).

The research has a significant limitation because it was conducted during the COVID 19 pandemic and covered 3 provinces. Moreover, the results of the research cannot be generalized because the research sample was not selected randomly. However, a significant number of questionnaires were obtained, which allows for obtaining a picture of the situation in small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland.

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