

HOW SUSTAINABLE LOCAL BUSINESSES OPERATE?*

A. A. MOCANU¹ G. BRĂTUCU²

Abstract: *In the context of transition to a circular economy, businesses for sustainable development are one of the main contributors which reduce CO2 emissions. The aim of this paper is to analyse some local sustainable businesses from Romania which encourage consumers to adopt a new model of consumption. These sustainable businesses are part of food and construction industries, two important polluting industries in the world. The study is based on secondary data analysis and its objectives are to highlight the impact of foundation these sustainable businesses in those local area and present how other business from these industries could become sustainable.*

Key words: *business, sustainability, consumption, community*

1. Introduction

The year 2020 and the Covid 19 pandemic have shown us how interconnected the world we live in today is, as well as the fact that it is important to pay attention to what we do on an individual level, but also to what those around us do, at the level of community or even industry level. Considering the recent events that have happened (the state of emergency in the countries around the world due to the spread of the Coronavirus infections, the alert states, the current armed conflicts from Ukraine), it proves that no year is like any other, and a sustainable and inclusive mindset of next generations around the world will be able to bring balance and confidence in the context of an unpredictable future, but with unprecedented access to knowledge and funding.

The circular economy is a new European political concept that considers the structural reformation of the current economy by abandoning the "take, make, consume, throw away" model and moving to a cyclical model, which is more suitable for living systems (europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0184_RO.html#title1). The circular economy is a model of production and consumption towards which humanity is currently moving and which involves distributing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling products and materials as much as possible so that their life cycle is extended.

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, ana.mocanu@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID

² Transilvania University of Braşov, gabriel.bratucu@unitbv.ro, ORCID: 0000-0002-9636-3660

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Climate neutrality until 2050 is the final objective of the European Union in the field of climate, the European Green Deal being the strategy for its achievement (consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal). The European Union made its commitment to protecting the planet by signing the Paris Agreement in 2015 together with several countries of the world. Its positioning as a leader in this field makes the European Union propose that Europe be the first climate neutral continent (ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/international-strategies/sustainable-development-goals/eu-and-united-nations-common-goals-sustainable-future_en).

2. Background

In a report prepared by Social Innovation Solutions, a global organization that supports solutions for a sustainable future, among others trends, one could say futuristic for Romania, some trends stand out for their sustainable character, such as: "Artificial Meat", more precisely good artificial meat, which does not involve deforestation for raising animals. Artificial Meat is cultivated in the laboratory and it involves the growth of tissue from muscle and fat cells, thus reducing the consumption of water, energy and land, used by common livestock industry, as well as reducing methane gas emissions. In short, everything started from the field of medicine, where artificial skin was created for burn victims (The 22 trends for 2022 Report).

Eat Just, a British company, has recently received approval to sell its cell-cultured chicken breasts and is planning together with other companies to launch this meat, the 2022 possibly being the year of the large-scale launch (techcrunch.com/2022/01/10/is-cell-cultured-meat-ready-for-prime-time).

Algae, personalized nutrition, plant editing, eating insects and green slime are other food trends for 2022 considering current food system is not sustainable for the entire environment. (rishexaminer.com/food/arid-40774254).

Another trend is Biophilic design, house plants are the inspiration that transforms a living room by bringing nature into the home. This is year's interior design trend, according to the report. The trend is to bring in as many things from the outside as possible, metals, stone, plants, wood, everything that people can borrow from nature to create integrated design arrangements for inside (The 22 trends for 2022 Report).

Also, very interesting is Artificial Flowers' trend because these represent a well appreciated modern alternative for people that have no time for taking care of natural plants. Blaine Box, a business from Barcelona, is based on "flower sharing" subscription service for business. This owns more than 300 floral arrangements that are rotating each month to different companies. The bouquets of flowers mimic natural flowers and were made of recycled plastics and fabrics. The company aims to expand in Spain, but also outside the country (eu-startups.com/2021/01/barcelona-based-blaine-box-lands-e300k-to-grow-its-flower-sharing-subscription-service).

Biophilic design and Artificial Flowers are two trends for 2022 that help to achieve sustainability and promote a circular economy approach. However, there are important steps to be taken in the field of the circular economy in the direction of its promotion among the population and at the level of businesses in all sectors. New technologies and the Internet are useful tools to support the integrative circular economy approach.

3. An analysis-exploration of Sustainable Businesses from Romania

For Romania, two sustainable local businesses, known through my own experience, active in the food and construction industries were selected for an analysis-exploration: Amurtel Bio Garden and Poiana Florilor District.

Amurtel Bio Garden is a project of the non-profit organization Amurtel Romania. The project has already created two full-time jobs for the local community, as well as seasonal jobs, but it also integrates young adults from the social integration programs of the NGO. In the Amurtel Bio Garden, as its name suggests, organic certified vegetables are grown for an average of 40 subscribers per week between April and December, and the sale of baskets is based on the purchase of subscriptions. The farm has completed its ninth year of production and it does not sell baskets or vegetables individually (amurtel.ro/en/dezvoltare-rurala/).

Poiana Florilor is the residential neighbourhood where houses are built from natural materials. The project is a complex one and is based on the principle of harmony with nature: the houses are made mainly of natural materials: stone, earth, wood, with an organic architecture. In the neighbourhood there are also green spaces with shrubs and fruit trees, aromatic plants and many flowers (poianaflorilor.org/).

Next, returning to the **Amurtel Bio Garden** in the village Poieni, the city of Patarlagele, which is developing a new model of agricultural enterprise based on the system of agriculture supported by the community. In this area, many small farmers have already withdrawn from the field of agriculture because it is impossible for them to compete with large-scale producers. Corporate supermarkets and distributors can offer customers low prices for large volumes of production, but these prices do not cover the production costs for small farmers (thus making it impossible for them to survive through conventional agriculture, except for wealthy landowners who own large properties because they sell large productions) (legume-eco.ro/en/).

The model promoted by Amurtel eliminates intermediaries, creating direct partnerships with final consumers. Consumers sign a partnership contract with the Amurtel Aid Association, as an organic certified agricultural producer, through which buyers receive a monthly basket of seasonal organic vegetables at a reasonable production price. Thus, consumers are not engaged in a simple commercial transaction, but are in a relationship of solidarity with the farm.

Partnerships between final consumers and Amurtel Bio Garden have at least two sides: a social one, because after the sales twelve children from Amurtel's residential home receive daily a basket with vegetables and an environmental one, because the vegetables are certified organic by Bioagricert.

Regarding the social side, consumers become the sponsors of the children placed into Amurtel's residential home's care after having been removed from situations of abuse and neglect. Consumers have the opportunity to visit or volunteer at the home where children are hosted or at the farm, they can participate in the organic agriculture and permaculture courses organized by the NGO, courses in which the twelve children are also integrated.

Also, Amurtel Bio Garden is helping the environment because it promotes biodiversity, compared to other large monocultural gardens. It should be mentioned that the baskets only travel a few tens of kilometers compared to the estimated average of 2400 kilometers which other vegetables travel to get from the farm to the plate (cuesa.org/learn/how-far-does-your-food-travel-get-your-plate). The farm makes the consumers' carbon footprint much greener (amurtel.ro/en/dezvoltare-rurala).

Further, a brief comparative analysis is presented between the Amurtel Bio Garden and supermarkets/vegetable distributors, and the resulting main ideas are:

- I. The Amurtel Bio Garden uses wooden baskets that it reuses for the following deliveries to customers (at the customer's request, the delivery can also be made in paper bags), compared to the supermarkets/vegetable distributors which use cardboard boxes and plastic bags (which they often do not reuse).
- II. Being a social enterprise of an NGO dealing with disadvantaged children, Garden grows vegetables for the residential center with children and young people in foster care while supermarkets/vegetable distributors occasionally support social causes for tax exemptions or to improve the image or do not support.
- III. The farm can receive guests and the children from the Amurtel residential center can also be visited for volunteering or recreation. Supermarkets/vegetable distributors have no way to offer these opportunities.
- IV. The farm provides transitional jobs and occupational therapy opportunities for young people who are preparing to leave the welfare system, compared to the supermarkets/vegetable distributors which are not involved in such activities.
- V. The garden promotes organic and sustainable agriculture through events and training courses while supermarkets/vegetable distributors promote usually organic and sustainable agriculture through ads.
- VI. The garden supports local agriculture and the rural environment, and the orders are exposed only to the farmers and the driver who delivers, the distribution channel being short, from the farm directly to the final consumer ("from farm to table"). On the other side, the distribution channel is long or very long, supermarkets/vegetable distributors transport the vegetables over long distances, which implies the generation of large amounts of carbon dioxide, the use of more fuel, and even the alteration of products.

Being a scientific approach, this comparative analysis answered a set of questions that the author formulated, but at the same time generated a lot of other questions and ideas that could not be included in the content of the current analysis, but which can be future subjects for similar scientific approaches.

Poiana Florilor District is located 30 kilometers from Bucharest, in the town of Piscu, Ilfov county, and is spread over a total area of approximately two hectares, where five houses are built from natural materials and an agro-tourism guesthouse, and the free lots (20) will continue the construction of natural houses (average area of a lot 500-600 square meters) (poianafiorilor.org/). In the neighbourhood, there is also a craft workshop where specific activities are carried out with the objective of promoting and training a life in harmony with nature.

Compared to other real estate neighbourhood at the national level, Casa Florilor stands out for the construction of houses with natural materials, thick adobe walls, cork

floors and colourful mosaics in the bathroom. Of course, this implies an expensive execution, but the benefits are long-lasting.

The houses have natural finishes such as: lime paint, ceramic mosaic in the bathrooms, wooden floors, double wooden windows with single glazing, interior/exterior wooden doors, wooden shutters, and the interior design is characterized by hand-made decorations: 3d modelled clay floral elements, semi-precious stone inserts and others. The neighbourhood is expanding and the business offers three models of houses that can be contracted by customers, and the execution term is one year.

Training and personal development activities take place in the neighbourhood, workshops, organized by the founders of Poiana Florilor (healthy food, natural houses, gardening, useful and creative recycling, ancient crafts). These are programmed based on requests and participation/visit fees are charged.

Of course, with regard to this sustainable business, a wider analysis can be made on the aspects related to sustainable development in comparison to other real estate developers on the market, but advanced knowledge of this field of construction is necessary so that, in the future, a research on this topic is called for.

4. Methodology

The current study is based on secondary qualitative research, carried out by consulting the official websites of institutions and businesses that support sustainable development, by consulting the websites of local sustainable businesses and by consulting some internal documents of Amurtel Bio Garden.

I chose for the analysis the two small local businesses from Romania because they support sustainability and I personally interacted with them. After searching on the Internet, I noticed that most of the data displayed on Google pages are about sustainable business ideas and sustainable businesses were not found in the first results.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study emphasize that both business models in Romania focus on sustainable development and are based on the support offered by their communities and develop a strong relationship with clients.

These business models should be intensively promoted so that they are taken over or be the source of inspiration for other businesses for sustainable development, and among the various communities found on a neighbourhood, city, village level, the idea should be intensively promoted to consume local products, products that affect the environment as little or not at all.

A good example of practice in the field of the circular economy that Amurtel Bio Garden uses is the return of baskets sold within the company and their use for the sale of new vegetables. Through such actions, the farm attracts the sympathy of consumers and is sustainable, even if sometimes the efforts are greater compared to the situation in which they would replace these materials with new ones. Companies that in the future will not succeed in incorporating circular economy actions into their activities will risk losing their visibility in front of consumers.

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