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## INTRODUCTION

This eleventh issue of *Economic and Environmental Studies* contains a selection of papers presented and discussed at the Seventh International Conference on "Current Issues of Sustainable Development" organised on 16–17 April 2007 by the Faculty of Economics of Opole University (Poland) in co-operation with the Polish Association of Environmental and Resource Economists and sponsored by the City Council of Opole and the Coastman Project. Some of the papers were published in *Management of Environmental Quality* 19(2).

The aim of organising such conferences is to create and extend a platform for discussion, exchange ideas and develop cooperation. Sustainable development has become more and more important, as it has become the fundament of European development policy. Although many local, regional, national and European development policies are based on the concept of sustainable development, of course a question remains as to whether practice supports sustainability.

A point that returns on many occasions is the question of how the concept of sustainable development is interpreted. Does its interpretation depend on the level of socio-economic development, meaning that environmental issues become important only after the fulfillment of socio-economic goals, while economic goals often receive priority? How should issues of sustainable development be discussed between highly developed countries and a country like Kazakhstan, which was forced to change its economic system after the break down of the Soviet Union while a question remains as to whether they really wanted change and, as a consequence, do they know what they want? In former Soviet republics political turbulence makes the creation of a policy for sustainable development very difficult and research seems to confirm that the main focus is on economic issues, while social issues may receive some attention. Within this context, the question was raised as to why Russia signed the Kyoto Protocol. It may be argued that they did for international political reasons.

Another important element of sustainable development is education, related to the question of how many people engage in education. By definition, education can only lead to positive results when people are involved. Furthermore, methods are of crucial importance. Education is not only about e.g. the theory and practice of sustainable development, but also about "getting the feeling". In order to achieve this, often new innovative methods are required and a question remains as to whether teachers are interested in changing their teaching methods, while changing ways of thinking and transferring ideas is time consuming (high transaction costs).

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From the discussion it seems that family, friends, income, work and direct / local environmental issues are more important than economic and social problems somewhere else. In this context information and knowledge are essential: Do citizens know what is happening? What are the sources of information? Where, how, what and for whom is it produced? Looking from a historical perspective, it seems that human beings need to develop. This implies continuous change. Does change mean that systems are improving or deteriorating? Or is sustainable development just a history of continuous perceived decline? The good old times are better – because they will not return?

What came out of the final discussion at the conference is that a problem may lie in the fact that scientists are “forced” by their discipline, funders, etc. to become specialised, while sustainable development often requires a broader, interdisciplinary approach. Another issue, when becoming specialised, is whether we understand the specific way of thinking in other subjects. Furthermore, is only what we can measure important, or should we also take the unmeasurable and difficult to measure issues into consideration? It is like an illness about which we do not know or which is not fully researched yet – we may not take the possibility of this illness into consideration, but we may face very serious consequences. So, is the high cost of measurement a reason for not taking issues into consideration, or is this the real task of science – to uncover the unknown?!

*Joost Platje, Janusz Słodczyk, David Ramsey*