



Where Have We Lost It? Sustainability Principles: from Local Agenda 21 to Present GHRM Promoted by Public Sector Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Local Agenda 21 promoted the idea of citizen involvement "at the grassroots". It was the "era" of glory for public participation at all levels and in all representative areas of the three sustainability pillars. From increasing institutional capacity to implement the sustainable development programs, namely local and county public authorities, to the involvement of all stakeholders in various fields, such as education, health, social services, culture, representatives of the business environment, small and medium-sized enterprises, institutions and organizations responsible and active in environmental protection, representatives of civil society, the entire community was part of the process. Beginning with the first concerns regarding the approach of sustainable practices in human resource management to the present, theorists and practitioners in the field are looking for viable solutions to increase the level of employee involvement in organizational activity (research issue). The present research aims to identify the moment when the paradigm shift in sustainability took place, from the "bottom-up" to the "top-down" register (the goal of the project). To this extent, the literature was reviewed (research methodology), using some databases contained in the Enformation portal (research data), in order to identify the level of interest in the reference topic (keywords: Local Agenda 21, SDGs) and the trend in its evolution. Future research should focus on the progress of Local Agenda 21, by means of structured interviews applied to stakeholders involved in the process of developing Strategies for Sustainable Development in the pilot cities where the Local Agenda 21 project was implemented.

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1. Introduction

In the present research we will address the issue of sustainability from the perspective of involvement in processes and actions. To this end, we carried out a critical review of the literature, by analyzing the abstract reviews contained in the Web of Science within Enformation database, in order to analyze the presence of the phrase Local Agenda 21 in the research articles. We have also searched apply a structured interview to sustainability managers during the implementation of the Local Agenda 21 project in Romania.

Sustainable development is the type of development that uses methods that do not harm the environment, so that natural resources can be available for future generations. [1], [2]

The first and most constant concerns regarding sustainable development belong to the United Nations, manifested on the occasion of the Conference on the Human Environment, organized in 1972, when the Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan were adopted. These documents established a set of principles and recommendations, aiming at preserving the human environment. It was the same conference that created the first UN program focused on environmental issues, called the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), a leading global authority in the field.

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development issued the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, a document that would be the starting point for the forty chapters of Agenda 21 and the 27 principles of the Rio Declaration.

As stated in Article number 27 of the report, humanity has the capacity to develop sustainably, to ensure that the needs of the present are met, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, and the only limitations of the weather are those imposed by the state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. A new era of economic growth was foreseen. [3]. In the chapter allocated to institutions, the

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Commission acknowledged the resilience to change at institutional level and the need to overcome this obstacle.

In 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, the UN Earth Summit decided to identify ways to encourage the governments of the member states to address ecological measures to stop pollution and the depletion of natural resources. During the same summit, in 1992, the process of adopting Agenda 21 was established, the Declaration of Principles on Forest Conservation and the Rio Declaration were issued.

With the documents adopted in 1992, 178 Heads of State and Government recognized that achieving sustainable development requires long-term perspectives and broad participation at all levels in policy-making, planning and management.

The main objective of Agenda 21 was cross-border cooperation between stakeholders to achieve sustainable action. Thus, decision-makers have adopted indicators to measure changes in the three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental.

In this context, the general objective proposed was to improve or restructure the decision-making process, so that the socio-economic and environmental issues would be fully integrated and a wide public participation would be ensured [4], an objective established in full accordance with the policy to be promoted for the implementation of the Local Agenda 21 program and pursued on the occasion of the special session of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, organized to measure the progress made within the project. The Millennium Summit in New York (2000) resulted in the presentation of a new development strategy, based on the new realities and needs of the new Millennium.

World Summit on Sustainable Development Johannesburg Summit (2002), also known as the Rio+10 Summit, issued the new Rio+10 Summit. action for sustainability. Later, in 2005, 2008 and 2010, New York hosted three high-level meetings, where decisions to revise the Millennium Development Goals would be adopted, with 2015 as deadline.

The Rio+20 Summit or the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, which returned to Rio de Janeiro in 2012, led to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Assembly, an entity responsible for setting priorities for global environmental policies and issuing international environmental legislation.

In 2013, in New York, Member States decided to hold a high-level summit in 2015 with a view to adopting a new set of sustainability goals. Thus, the UN Summit for Sustainable Development in New York (2015), through the plan entitled *Transforming Our World*, issued a declaration, the 2030 Agenda with 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets.

It was also in 2015, when Paris hosted the Climate Change Conference (COP21), which resulted in the Paris Agreement, ratified by 187 signatories.

As for the UN international meeting, Stockholm+50, the event was organized under the auspices of extreme global inequality, doubled by the COVID-19 crisis. Although the event was entitled *A Healthy Planet for the Prosperity of All – Our Responsibility, Our Opportunity*, during the meeting it was noted that the progress made was not in the direction predicted in June 1972 at the UN Conference on the Human Environment. [5]

2. Literature review

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also called the Global Goals, were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and they were a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and create the framework for all people to enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 [6]. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres [7] expressed concern about the level of achievement of the sustainability goals at the mid-term of the 2030 Agenda, when either stagnation or setbacks were recorded for more than 30% of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are integrated, recognizing that actions taken in one area will affect the results achieved in other areas, and development will have to balance sustainability on the three pillars: social, economic and environmental. States are committed to providing support to less developed states.

Goal number 8 – Decent work and economic growth – is subsumed by the Sustainable Economic Growth target. In this context, sustainable human resources management is promoted.

2.1. Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM)

Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) or Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) emerged as an academic concept from the debate in the field of sustainable development and corporate sustainability. In 1996, Wehrmeyer argued that if a company is to adopt an environmentally friendly approach to its activities, employees are the key to its success or failure [8], emphasizing the importance of sustainability-oriented strategic management in human resource management.

One of the most common definitions refers to GHRM as aspects of human resource management in relation to the environment [9], [10]. A broader definition considers GHRM to represent phenomena relevant to understanding the relationships between organizational activities with an impact on the natural environment and the design, evolution, implementation and influence of HRM systems [11].

Some of GHRM's goals include alerting employees to global environmental issues by initiating project proposals, training employees on more environmentally friendly practices, and encouraging them to join the effort to identify sustainable initiatives [10].

The German Journal of Human Resource Management dedicates its entire May 2011 issue [12] to GHRM research.

2.2. Sustainable Human Resource Management Practices

In the recent period, the literature registers multiple concerns related to the human resources sustainable management: from the interest of private companies in fulfilling corporate social responsibility obligations [13], [14] to concerns regarding the barriers placed to the sustainable development of public sector organizations [15] or, on the contrary, the adoption of circular economy actions [16] [17] or even awareness of discrepancies between theory and practice in terms of corporate social responsibility and sustainable human resource management [18].

Other authors pay increased attention to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by approaching green practices in human resource management [19] or involving managers in the social responsibility of their employees, by promoting and tracking employees' ecological behaviors beyond organizational boundaries [20], [21].

The relationship between transformational leadership and green human resources management [20] or the impact that sustainable human resources management, leadership and organizational culture have on both the ecological behavior of employees [22] and on the sustainable performance of the company [13], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25] [26] is the center of some researchers' concerns.

Shah (2019) constructs a valid scale for measuring the level of integration of sustainable human resource management through the SEM method. [27]

Chaudhary (2020) researches the impact of sustainable human resource management on employee behavior, both task-related and voluntary. [28]

The results of a research [29] demonstrate that sustainable human resource management practices positively correlate with employee resilience and determine a high level of engagement. In turn, this has a positive effect on employee performance [30], through involvement [31].

Another theme addressed in the research is organizational civic behavior (OCB), [32] a predictor of outstanding performance, located in the sphere of extreme positive attitude. Studies have examined the relationship between organizational civic behavior and organizational culture, attitudes, personality, affective dispositions, employee stress, and organizational performance [33]. Furthermore, researchers have identified a positive correlation between OCB and GHRM [34], [35], [36], [37], [38], [39].

2.3. Corporate Social Responsibility

Although the term "corporate" refers in particular to companies and, as a rule, corporate social responsibility is the prerogative of private sector organizations, it should be noted that the level of carbon footprint associated with the activity of a public sector organization can be as high or even higher than that of a private entity.

The movement of employees to and from the workplace involves the use of means of transport that causes a direct impact on the environment: fuel consumption, pollution caused by public/private transport. *Providing* all the facilities necessary for the operation of public buildings involves the use of water supply, sewerage, energy (electricity/methane gas) services for lighting and heating the workplace, waste disposal (separate collection or not). *The performance of specific activities* requires the purchase of goods – fixed assets, inventory objects and consumables: furniture, equipment, office supplies, paper, printer cartridges – and services: telephone, internet, security and protection services of goods and buildings, occupational medicine services, OSH/PSI.

Undoubtedly, public sector organizations at all levels are large employers and purchasers of products and services. Thus, in recent years, only personnel expenses have registered a constant increase.

According to data provided by Eurostat on the average remuneration of national civil servants in central public administration, at the level of European countries, the average income, expressed in Euro, registered significant increases in the period between 2015 and 2024, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Dataset: Average remuneration of national civil servants in central public administration

GEO (Tags)	2015 - S2	2024 - H2
Belgium	2.673,6	3.630
Bulgaria	557,0	1.301
Czech Republic	988,7	2.426
Denmark	2.517,2	4.266
Germany	3.735,6	4.974
Estonia	1.807,1	3.736

GEO (Tags)	2015 - S2	2024 - H2
Spain	2.568,5	3.176
France	2.759,4	2.950
Italy	1.618,9	2.011
Cyprus	2.136,3	2.784
Luxembourg	5.622,8	6.612
Hungary	763,8	1.638
Malta	1.306,8	1.731
Austria	2.643,1	4.058
Poland	852,8	1.482
Portugal	1.467,1	1.860
Romania	390,9	1.173
Slovakia	968,1	2.483
Finland	3.205,5	4.109
Sweden	2.901,2	3.011

Source: own processing from Eurostat

As mentioned above, public authorities (government departments or local authorities) purchase services, works and goods from companies, through public procurement procedures:

"Every year, more than 250,000 public authorities in the EU spend around 14% of GDP (around €2 trillion per year) on the purchase of services, works and goods. In many sectors, such as energy, transport, waste management, social protection and the provision of health or education services, public authorities are the main buyers", is mentioned on the European Commission's website, Single Market Economy. In the light of official data, the public sector uses procurement to boost jobs, growth and investment, but also to create an innovative, energy-efficient and resource-efficient and socially inclusive economy. [40]

To the extent that the employer – the public sector organization – can be considered a public corporation, its employees should cultivate responsible behavior in relation to the organization in which they operate, the environment and society in general.

The research of employee involvement in the workplace carried out in organizations in different fields of activity resulted in worrying figures for both the public sector [41], [42] and the private sector [43] [44] [45]. Research reveals that motivation at work is determined by motivational involvement and motivational persistence [46]. Motivational engagement can be operationalized through participatory leadership [47].

In this study, we address the gaps identified in the research, proposing the approach of sustainable solutions in human resources management as a contribution to the existing research.

3. Research Methodology

This paper aims to identify the momentum when the paradigm shift in sustainability took place, from the "bottom-up" register, promoted by Local Agenda 21 to the "top-down" register. In this context, we approached the documentary research, which had two stages. In the first stage we approached the quantitative documentary method.

In order to highlight the trend in the researchers' concerns, we proceeded to the systematic literature review (SLR) contained in the Web of Science database in order to identify the number of articles containing the terms *Agenda 21/Local Agenda 21*, published between 2000 and 2025. We chose the Web of Science database because it is the largest publication and with the highest number of citations. We narrowed the search by the access to the publication, choosing only *open access* articles, and also the language of the article, choosing *English*. The result of the search in the WoS core collection was 379 items dispersed during the reference period, as can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2. Data related to Agenda 21/Local Agenda 21 and Green Human Resource Management/GHRM, collected from the Web of Science databases

Year of publication	Number of articles			
	LA21	GHRM	Green Human Resource Management	GHRM + Green Human Resource Management
1	2	3	4	5 (3+4)
2025	1	24	279	303
2024	17	51	502	553
2023	15	46	414	460
2022	17	43	389	432
2021	15	22	393	415
2020	20	15	264	279
2019	18	8	168	176

Year of publication	Number of articles			
	LA21	GHRM	Green Human Resource Management	GHRM + Green Human Resource Management
1	2	3	4	5 (3+4)
2018	20	2	107	109
2017	16	2	93	95
2016	11	3	95	98
2015	10	1	68	69
2014	15	0	53	53
2013	25	1	48	49
2012	16	0	33	33
2011	12	0	34	34
2010	17	0	41	41
2009	18	0	20	20
2008	13	0	15	15
2007	15	0	21	21
2006	13	0	10	10
2005	11	0	7	7
2004	9	0	4	4
2003	9	0	6	6
2002	15	0	7	7
2001	11	0	9	9
2000	20	0	4	4

Source: own processing

Our option was also to choose articles exhibited according to the highest number of citations. We found out that non-relevant articles for the study were listed, that contained in the title or in the abstract one of the words of the phrase "Local Agenda 21". For this reason, we chose a *relevance* filter. The second stage of the research consisted in the examination of the articles' title and abstract, thus 304 met the necessary criteria. The interest in the research can be observed in *Figure 1*:

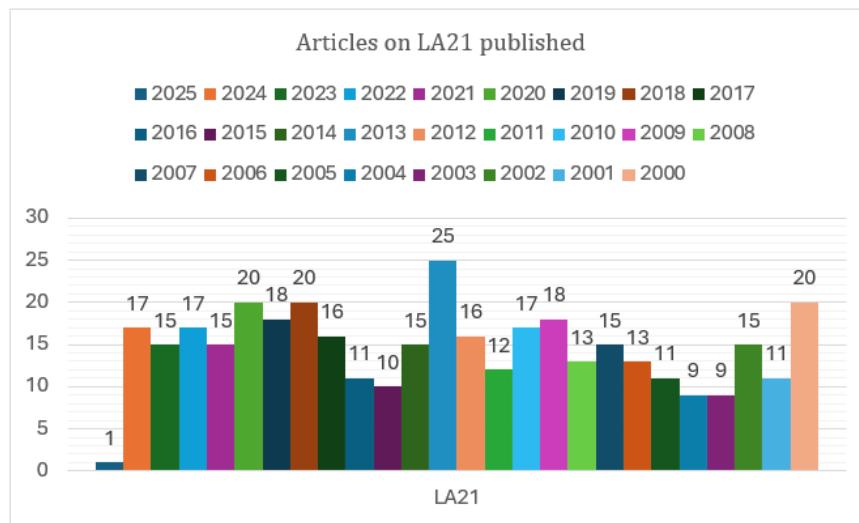


Figure 1. Number of articles on Local Agenda 21 published

Source: own processing from Web of Science databases source

The pick of the interest in Local Agenda 21 is year 2013, when the project was being developed in many areas. Local authorities in Romania were also concerned in sustainability issues approached in a "bottom-up" manner.

Another topic related to the interest of the present research was to identify the research of Green Human Resource management/GHRM along the time (2000 – 2025), using the same filters of the above-mentioned database.

The search resulted in 1.214 documents, the raise of awareness and interest for the researchers started with 2018, when more than one hundred articles were published, and the number of articles was doubled the following years, as shown in *Figure 2*:

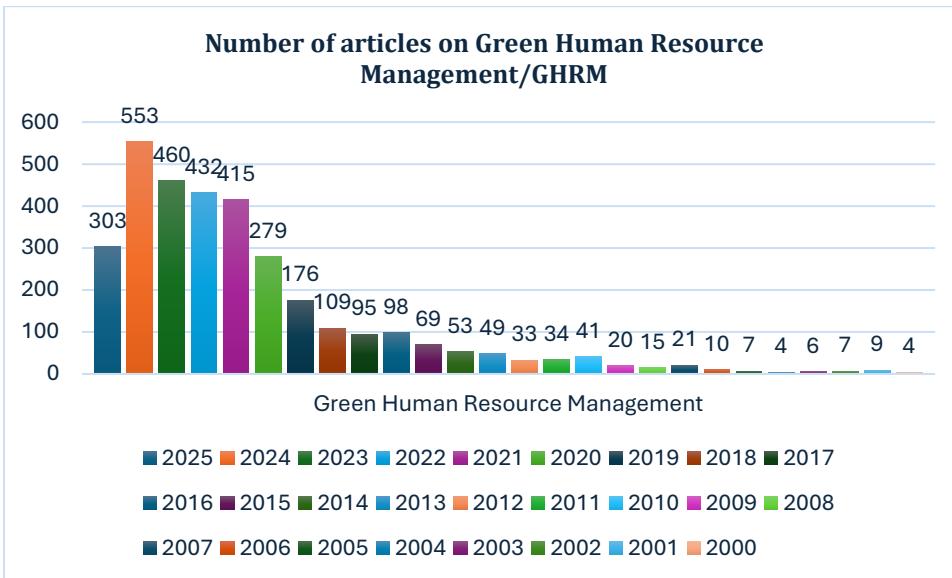


Figure 2. Number of articles on Green Human Resource Management/GHRM published

Source: own processing from Web of Science databases source

From the data presented in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, one can notice that quantitative analysis can be relevant up to a certain point, however insufficient to facilitate researchers' ability to draw a conclusion concerning the interest in Local Agenda 21, sustainability, local governance and local involvement on the one hand, and Green Human Resource Management and GHRM and related issues, on the other hand.

4. Results

To meet the purpose of the present research, aiming to identify the momentum of paradigm shift in sustainability from the "bottom-up" to the "top-down" register, the results of the research showed that the majority of the research articles tend to treat the terms subject to analysis in a more theoretical approach. To reach to a relevant response, we conclude that the quantitative analysis could be doubled by a qualitative one. Future research should approach a more practical view, performed by means of a structured interview applied to sustainable development managers, the implementation team members of the Local Agenda 21 project in Romania. The questions formulated for the interview should address certain research hypotheses. As far as GHRM is concerned, the "top-down" register should also be investigated by means of a questionnaire or interview applied at organizational level. Moreover, the researchers' interest on the topic is not equivalent to the decision makers' intention to change the approach of the topic.

5. Conclusions

Both Local Agenda 21 and GHRM focus on creating a sustainable management model in the public and private sectors, by integrating environmental management into the work process, into organizational practices, from selection and recruitment, to promotion, motivation, to increase employees' awareness of environmental issues. Promoting such a type of management, although less exploited in the public sector, can lead to an increase in organizational reputation, increased job satisfaction and performance, in general. All the above mentioned aspects are valued by both LA21 and GHRM, but they appoint a different approach.

Social responsibility and job satisfaction can be cultivated by adopting sustainable human resource management, which would highlight the importance of social responsibility within the organization, focusing on raising the level of employee job satisfaction. Public sector organizations management should also be looked deeper as far as CSR is concerned. Some research has highlighted the low level of job satisfaction of public sector employees, which can hinder the design of a human resource management model oriented towards social responsibility.

The raise of researchers' interest does not always coincide with the raise of public awareness concerning the GHRM topic. From this perspective, LA21 approach focuses on raising public awareness, both the internal public and external one, identifying the central stakeholders in the process. As far as the internal public is concerned, some research suggests that encouraging the psychological contract [48], by developing the employer-employee relationship, is a "win-win" relationship for both the organization and the employee; Through this type of relationship, both organizational and personal objectives of the employee can be achieved, by increasing involvement. To this end, GHRM processes are relevant on engaging employees to contribute to the improvement of the organizational environment, by strengthening partnership relationships (between colleagues, management – subordinates). Thus, human resources managers play a strategic role, as promoters of innovation in the field of human resources, as designers of processes [49], [50].

This research contributes to the knowledge in the field, through the theoretical and practical approach of the concepts of sustainability at the organizational level. We are, however, certain that there is no perfect congruence between the theoretical and practical approaches. Applicability is limited to organizations led by managers with a participatory leadership style. Future research will be able to approach the topic from the perspective of stakeholder theory. Even though the interest in sustainability among researchers has remained constant, practitioners are constrained by variables independent of their own will.

The public sector, strongly regulated by both national and international legislation, as well as by domestic rules and norms, can show a strong resistance to change [51]. The implementation of sustainable, innovative solutions in the public sector is possible only with the support of decision-makers for the adoption of normative acts that encourage sustainability, for the development of sustainable policies, for the allocation of financial resources.

Lack of political will can be an impediment to adopting sustainable practices. Also, the low involvement of all stakeholders [52] can lead to the adoption of 'façade' measures. Unethical behaviors and actions, corruption work to the detriment of sustainability. The organizational culture and values of the organization are key elements in this process. An organization of integrity will cultivate employees of integrity. Increasing institutional capacity, as promoted by the Local Agenda 21 pilot projects in Romania, for the adoption of sustainability, may be the solution. The philosophy promoted by Local Agenda 21, of encouraging citizen participation and involving all stakeholders in the process [53].

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The present research was based on previous research of the two domains. Due to the interest of previous researchers, sectoral research could be conducted in the future, in order to clarify certain aspects, useful both from the theoretical and practical perspectives.

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