ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMUNICATION IN SELECTED COMPANIES IN THE PODRAVSKA STATISTICAL REGION

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Drinking fountain at the Faculty of Arts student campus in Maribor.

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ABSTRACT: The paper presents best practices pursued by eight companies from the Podravska statistical region selected because they promote green transition in this society. In the theoretical section, the article presents environmental responsibility as part of corporate social responsibility and deals with the type of communication needed to address and motivate people to implement the EU Green Deal goals. The empirical section analyses eight semi-structured interviews with representatives from selected companies in the Podravska statistical region. The results highlight long-term efforts to raise public awareness about the environmental crisis (without major visible effects), financial aid as the main motivation factor to implement green practices, shortage of specific training courses in communication, and the need for locally focused training.

KEYWORDS: environmental responsibility, sustainability, sustainable organisational practices, green motives, communication, Podravska statistical region.

Okoljska odgovornost in komunikacija v izbranih podjetjih v Podravski statistični regiji

POVZETEK: V prispevku so predstavljene dobre prakse osem podjetij iz podravske statistične regije, ki so bila izbrana zaradi spodbujanja zelenega prehoda v tem okolju. V teoretičnem delu članek predstavlja okoljsko odgovornost kot del družbene odgovornosti podjetij in obravnava vrsto komunikacije, ki je potrebna za nagovarjanje in motiviranje ljudi za izvajanje ciljev zelenega dogovora EU. V empiričnem delu je analiziranih osem polstrukturiranih intervjujev s predstavniki izbranih podjetij v podravski statistični regiji. Rezultati izpostavljajo dolgoročna prizadevanja za ozaveščanje javnosti o okoljski krizi (brez večjih vidnih učinkov), finančno pomoč kot glavni motivacijski dejavnik za izvajanje zelenih praks, pomanjkanje posebnih usposabljanj na področju komuniciranja in potrebo po lokalno usmerjenem usposabljanju.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: okoljska odgovornost, trajnostnost, trajnostne organizacijske prakse, zeleni motivi, komunikacija, Podravska statistična regija

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1 Introduction

In the article »Six decades of human geography and environmental protection in Acta geographica Slovenica,« Urbanc et al. (2014) outline the development of Slovenian and foreign thought in the field of human geography and environmental protection, where globalisation has become a key concept in much of the latest research. Also, Zorn and Komac (2010) discuss how the focus of research has shifted from traditional human geography topics to contemporary issues such as mobility, sustainable development, globalization, creativity and cultural industry (Bole 2008). Since sustainability theory focuses on balancing socio-cultural, economic, and environmental systems, research in this field inherently takes an interdisciplinary approach, going beyond the confines of any single scientific discipline (Nučič 2012).

In this study we focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR), a business model where companies integrate social concerns into their interactions with stakeholders, emphasizing sustainability, accountability, and transparency (European Commission 2001). To date, theories have addressed four core areas of CSR: economic, legislative, ethical and philanthropic (Carroll 1991), and CSR discourse has expanded to several types of CRS: environmental responsibility, digital responsibility etc. (Bednarova and Serpeninova 2023). We also focus on environmental economics and corporate environmental responsibility (CER) (Bansal and Roth 2000), which has become a necessity in times of visible (negative) changes to the environment.

The transition to a resilient society, however, is unthinkable without successful communication of the environmental crisis to various audiences and in cooperation with multiple stakeholders. The Pilot Project for the Renewal of Higher Education for a Green and Resilient Transition has been running from 2022 to 2025 at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, including a module called: Komuniciranje podnebne krize za uspešen prehod v zeleno družbo (Engl. Communicating the climate crisis for a successful transition to a green society; https://zelen.kom.ff.um.si/), within which eight interviews were conducted. These were carried out with various representatives from private and public sectors such as agriculture, public institutions, industry, commercial centres and craftsmanship (hereafter: companies) located in the Podravska statistical region, which is notable for manufacturing, vehicle maintenance, scientific activity, and transport, employing 46.54% of the workforce in this area in 2020 (Pučnik 2022).

The aim of the article is to examine best green practices among these companies in the Podravska statistical region, focusing on their motives for adopting environmentally responsible actions, the communication strategies they use to promote these actions, and their expectations regarding the green transition. All this will serve to raise awareness, create knowledge and to motivate environmentally responsible actions among students, employees, and others, connected to the University of Maribor, because we believe universities are key stakeholders in tackling major societal challenges.

We were particularly interested in what best practices companies are implementing in respect of environmental responsibility, including the context of sustainability and green transition. Furthermore, we were interested in the motives that stimulated them to initiate these best practices, their public communication in this respect, and what challenges they identified as necessary to overcome for a future green transition.

1.1 Corporate social responsibility

Social responsibility has been an integral part of human communities since their inception, evolving with societal values and priorities (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir and Davídsdóttir 2019). From ancient Rome to the modern era, awareness of the impact of social behaviour has grown, particularly in response to industrialization, technological advances, and entrepreneurship. This shift has placed CSR at the forefront, emphasizing environmental impact, workers' rights, consumer protection, and anti-corruption measures.

As societal expectations have evolved, so have corporate goals and practices, aligning with public values in economics, law, ethics, and philanthropy (Carroll 1991). This shift is evident in the mid-20th century's theoretical definitions, international commissions, and new legislation focusing on CSR (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir and Davídsdóttir 2019). Therefore, multiple European reports define seven inter-related core subjects of CSR: employees, customers, local community, environment, human rights, ethical behaviour, and leadership (European Commission … 2001; International organisation … 2010). Zore, Bastič and Mulej (2016) established that CSR towards employees, human rights and ethical behaviour are united into CSR leadership towards employees. Socially responsible companies engage in ethical behaviour, innovative economic

development, quality work environments, and local community contributions, often exceeding legal requirements (McWilliams and Siegel 2001).

CSR practices enhance corporate reputation and reliability, influencing consumer and stakeholder perceptions (McWilliams and Siegel 2001; Servaes and Tamayo 2014). Feng et al. (2021) found that CSR improves business processes and stakeholder engagement, while Jo and Harjoto (2011) highlighted CSR's importance for shareholders, managers, and regulators. CSR also impacts employee attraction and retention, since individuals prefer companies, whose values align with their own (Gross 2014). A 2016 survey indicated that CSR towards employees is the most prevalent practice in Slovenia, with companies recognizing the value of social responsibility for better relationships and reputation. However, there is a lack of comprehensive implementation of CER, which is crucial for genuine green change (Zore, Bastič and Mulej 2016).

Studies (Sila and Cek 2017; Newman et al. 2020) show a positive correlation between CSR and corporate performance, with tailored CSR activities that address local community needs having the highest impact. CSR enhances profitability, stakeholder relations, reputation, staff retention, efficiency, innovation, and business generation. Recent research by Žabkar et al. (2022) has begun exploring CSR in the Slovenian context.

1.2 Motivation for corporate environmental responsibility

In addition to the general motivation for companies to act in a socially responsible way, as described above, there are also specific motivational factors for environmentally responsible behaviour. These are as follows: a) the competitiveness motive, whereby companies achieve long-term profitability by reducing and optimising environmental costs, which increases their competitiveness in the market and consequently their profits (Uecker-Mercado and Walker 2012; Gonzalez-Benito and Gonzalez-Benito 2004); b) the legitimation motive, whereby companies satisfy official norms and regulations by acting in an environmentally friendly way and consequently avoid sanctions (Sila and Cek 2017); c) the eco-responsibility motive, whereby companies satisfy social expectations and values (Bansal and Roth 2000); and d) the corporate reputational motive, driven by pressure from government, customers, competitors and the media, which is raising the demands for environmentally friendly performance from stakeholders (Berry and Rondinelli 1998; Knanna and Anton 2002). Žabkar et al. (2022) distinguish between instrumental and moral motives for CSR. Public perception of environmentally responsible and irresponsible companies is strongly linked to emotion. Companies that are perceived as environmentally irresponsible trigger feelings of anger and disgust in individuals, leading to the spread of negative opinion, the writing of complaints and potentially even to boycotts. On the other hand, companies that are perceived to be environmentally responsible trigger emotions of gratitude, leading to the spread of positive opinion, greater resistance to negative information about the company, and potentially to identification with the company and new investment (Xie, Bagozzi and Grønhaug 2015).

1.3 Environmental economy

All companies, not just those in the environmental economy sector, must comply with various national and supranational regulations to become more environmentally friendly (Zore, Bastič and Mulej 2016). The environmental economy sector includes activities like producing organic vegetables, renewable energy, and organic waste treatment, and conserving natural resources. Companies in this sector adapt their processes to be environmentally friendly, often implementing zero waste policies and circular economy principles. This has led to an increase in companies within the environmental economy sector across the EU. »The 2014–2021 environmental economy – statistics by EU member state provided by European Commission; Eurostat report 2024«, shows employment in this sector growing by 22.7% from 2014 to 2021, especially in agriculture. In Slovenia, green economy employment grew by 20% from 2014 to 2021, although its growth rate is among the slowest in the EU. Adapting to green policies poses significant challenges for companies. A 2022 survey found that half the organizations are not ready to implement green policies, owing to a lack of awareness and knowledge, though a third have made some environmental changes for profit (European Union … 2022). In Slovenia, the green transition is slow because of low investment and insufficient motivation in companies, as there is not yet an awareness of the benefits of the green transition

for a company's bottom line. Despite this, 75% of companies believe they are adapting their processes to some extent (Kmet Zupančič 2023).

1.4 Communication

Communication is an important part of CSR, and companies themselves are aware of this. Effective CSR communication is based on identifying the expectations of various stakeholder groups and on designing a communication strategy that covers the stakeholders involved (Kitic et al. 2015; Testarmata et al. 2018; Nadanyiova, Majerova and Gajanova 2021). When communicating, it is important to identify effective channels that cover different audiences. Recently, social networks have been gaining in effectiveness (Nadanyiova, Majerova and Gajanova 2021). It is important that communication be transparent, and based on real, verifiable data, and that the content that is communicated be linked to the actual practices of the company.

The content and style of communication must be tailored to the target group, since stakeholder groups have different expectations and needs. At the same time, communication with employees is also important, as a company's employees are a powerful channel for enhancing the company' image and spreading positive opinion (Dawkins 2005). Four common CSR communication practices are as follows: a) reporting on CSR activities; b) running social campaigns; c) publishing sustainability reports; and d) disclosing clear information on the origin of products (Borges et al. 2023). To communicate effectively about the environment, it is important to follow the general guidelines for successful communication, which apply to companies as well as to all other organisations: a two-way communication format; the organisation of competitions and campaigns; adaptation to everyday life; clear, simple explanations; solutions for everyday life; and adaptation of the content to the local environment (Wirth, Prutsch and Grothmann 2014).

2 Methodology

2.1 Research problem

In the survey we were sought to find out how the selected companies from the Podravska statistical region face the CSR situation from an environmental perspective. We were primarily interested in what best practices they are implementing in this respect, including the context of sustainability and green transition. Furthermore, we were interested in the motives for CER. Žabkar et al. (2022) distinguish instrumental from moral motives (also called green extrinsic and green intrinsic motives (Li et al. 2020)) in the factors stimulating companies to imitate these best practices. We were also interested in their public communication in this respect. Successful transition to a green society requires strategic communication of the environmental crisis, which is not yet sufficiently established in Slovenia. Finally, we sought to understand what challenges companies identified as necessary to overcome for a future green transition.

Given the limited research on CER motives, communication, and future expectations, a qualitative study was undertaken in four phases. First, an extensive review of academic literature and press releases on CER practices was undertaken. Second, lectures on conducting interpretative interviews were provided for the researchers. In the third phase, interviews were conducted with broad themes (best practices, perceptions, motives, communication, and expectations), allowing participants to speak freely and minimize biased responses. Lastly, the data was analysed using a provisional code list from the theoretical framework. The interviews were transcribed and entered in a qualitative statistical package. The responses were sorted into coding categories to develop a smaller final set of categories for each theme.

2.2 Instrument and Sample

In the beginning of 2023, best practices in the Eastern Slovenia cohesion region from private and public sectors were analysed, concerning the green transition. Purposive sampling was used: participants in the ZELEN.KOM project created a list of companies and public institutions that are considered examples of best practices according to the personal judgment of individual interviewers. Each department of the Faculty

of Arts at the University of Maribor conducted at least one interview, eleven altogether. Eight were from the Podravska statistical region, and one each from the Pomurska, Savinjska, and Posavska statistical regions, where companies were representing various sectors. Consent was obtained from each interviewee. A compromise between narrative and guided interviews was sought.

Our final sample contains eight interviews from the Podravska statistical region that were conducted with eight company representatives. The interviewees (six men and two women) were experts in their fields – in decision-making positions or a part of the environmental responsibility teams (Table 1).

2.2 Data collection and processing procedure

Interviews were conducted in February and March 2023. Six interviews were conducted in person and two at a distance (one with the help of the Zoom App and one via the MS Teams App). They lasted approximately 70 minutes; the anonymity of interviewees was ensured.

In April 2023, the transcripts were made, and short reports were written by the interviewers. Each transcript was coded separately in QDA Miner Lite14 (free qualitative data analysis software) for the prescribed themes (best practices, perceptions, motives, communication, and expectations), after which codes, categories, and sub-themes were individually identified. Interpretation and extraction of the conclusions and recommendations were completed and were further supported by quotations from individual interviewees (Vogrinc 2008).

Table 1: Sample description of eight interviewees from the private and public sector located in the Podravska statistical region.

interview number	*activity – TSmedia	**activity – SKD	field of activity	organisation status	number of employees
1	catering	I56.210 – occasional preparation and delivery of meals	plant-based food preparation	cooperative	no data
2	tourism	R91.040 – activities of botanical and zoological gardens, protection of natural values	nature conservation	public institution	100–149
3	culture and arts	R90.030 – artistic creativity	wood craft product manufacturer	independent entrepreneur	1
4	agriculture, crop production, fruit growing	A01.610 – crop production services	tourist & eco farm	one holder of supplementary activity on the farm	no data
5	utilities and waste	E38.320 – extraction of secondary raw materials from residues and waste	waste collection and treatment company	limited liability company	250–499
6	tourist farm	I56.105 – tourist farms without rooms	tourist & eco farm	one holder of supplementary activity on the farm	no data
7	maintenance and management of buildings	L68.320 – management of immovable property for remuneration or on a fee or contract basis	management of logistic centre	limited liability company	10-19
8	real estate, trade	G47.110 – retail sale in non-specialised stores, mainly of food products	commercial centre	limited liability company	more than 2000

* TSmedia: A comprehensive private database for accessing data from https://www.bizi.si.

** SKD: Standard classification of activities; version 2008 is currently still in force in Slovenia, but a new SKD 2025 will be in use from 2025. This is an obligatory national standard which is used for the purposes of defining the main activity and for the classification of business entities and their units, to meet the requirements of official and other administrative data collections, as well as national and international statistics and analyses.

3 Results

3.1 Implementation of best practices

Corporate sustainability must include a social and an environmental dimension, in addition to excellent governance (Sila and Cek 2017). Therefore, to comprehensively assess the sustainable performance of companies that we present as examples of best practice, it is necessary to examine them from an environmental, social, and governance (ESG) perspective (Kim and Li 2021), where the latest is a set of standards for how a company operates with respect to the environment and its people. From the social point of view, based on stakeholder theory, we distinguish between activities targeting internal stakeholders, such as employee education, fair pay, and corporate governance, and those targeting external stakeholders, like job creation, public health, and fair business conduct (Hawn and Ioannou 2016; Žabkar et al. 2020). The economic aspect focuses on financial and non-financial performance, including profitability, growth, and employee and customer satisfaction (Žabkar et al. 2020). Environmental practices in companies include reducing resource consumption, greening processes and products, and minimizing waste and emissions, aligning with circular economy objectives like recycle, reuse, replace, renew, and reduce (Murray, Skene and Haynes 2017), and supporting ecosystem services for environmental conservation.

From the eight interviewed companies, regarding CSR, six of the interviewees conduct various forms of educational and awareness-raising activities, mainly related to their narrow field of activity, some of them also working with government bodies responsible for educational activities. For example, the company of interviewee fiveinvests in employee training, and every new employee must undergo »a training programme where the requirements of standards, environmental legislation are also presented, so that basically every employee is already competent in environmental protection.« Four interviewees highlight (interviews 1, 3, 4 and 6), the importance of effective integration of the company into the environment and taking account of local needs and initiatives (interview 2).

Regarding economic concerns, four interviewees talked about the importance of collaboration with multiple stakeholders (interviews 2, 4, 5 and 8), finding it important to build teams in a planned way (4/8), where employee share similar values (at work and in private life), and exposing the need for a changed entrepreneurial model (interviews 1, 3, 8; for example, the interviewee from company 3 said that he values his business as a hobby). No interviewee emphasis profitability.

Regarding ESR three interviewees highlighted measures related to more efficient use of energy in the infrastructure of companies or public institutions. Four interviewees also highlight the use of local ingredients and materials (interviews 1, 3, 4 and 6). Three interviewees link their best practices to their efforts to reduce their carbon footprint or emissions in the environment. Shortening transport routes, or transport routes in general, was the most frequently mentioned concrete example of this. The same proportion of interviewees highlighted zero waste and/or recycling (such as packaging products in reusable packaging) as examples of best practice. Interviewee three said: »My company works like this, let's say I don't really have any leftovers, I don't have anything in a month maybe one bag of rubbish /…/. With the scrap wood, we heat our (work)shop, so we have almost zero-waste production and operation of the company.« A few of the interviewees mentioned environmentally friendly agriculture as the production of food without pesticides, grouping into cooperatives, and ensuring transparency and traceability.

3.2 Motives

The motives can significantly influence the effectiveness and sustainability of the practices implemented. Analysing companies' motives for pursuing CER helps us understand the underlying reasons behind corporate environmental actions – whether driven by regulatory compliance, market competitiveness, ethical considerations, or a combination of these factors.

When analysing motives, all interviewees pointed out that the initiators behind the motives were related to the company itself (the directors, or founders of the company). In some cases, the initiators are national authorities of the Republic of Slovenia, such as responsible ministries with respective legislation, or of the European Union, such as the Nature 2000 commitments. In individual cases, motives are connected to

changes in the expectations, needs and requirements of various stakeholders, including customers and local organizations.

The motives mentioned by interviewees when carrying out environmentally responsible activities are presented in Table 2. Žabkar et al. (2022) divided motives into instrumental and moral (also called green extrinsic and green intrinsic motives (Li et al. 2020)). We divided the motivations for »green behaviour« – behaviour in line with environmental responsibility and sustainability, into (green) intrinsic motives and (green) extrinsic motives. In some places, the reported motives, e. g. why an organisation is doing something, do overlap.

Based on the answers from our interviewees (Table 2), we grouped the codes into six categories for the green intrinsic motivators. In terms of companies' intrinsic motives to implement these best practices in the field of sustainability and environmental responsibility, many interviewees indicated that one of their motives was concern for preserving the environment and nature in various ways. Companies involved in food production and/or processing are motivated to act by an awareness of the importance of consuming healthy local food of high quality and of living in harmony with nature. This is evidenced by the quotation from interviewee 6: »The first thing that made us decide is for sure that you actually offered the best quality food to the children who came« and: »We are indeed responsible to our predecessors and to our successors to leave /…/ nature and this forest ecosystem as it should be«, and to influence people's awareness of issues related to environmental and nature protection and sustainability. Two interviewees stated that the motive for best practices within the companies or public institutions where they work is related to their effective integration into the environment in which they operate. This is reflected, for example, in the recruitment of local people.

We further detected codes for extrinsic motivators and grouped these into six categories. The specific extrinsic motivators highlighted by the interviewees were to enable transparency and traceability of products (in the context of recognition), the desire to become a socially responsible company, the desire to meet green transition standards, to demonstrate the distinctiveness of their product as compared to competitors, the interest of potential customers, the organic farming guidelines, and the desire to be an example of best practice in their own field; however, some also recognise, that »The problem is that green is now the fashionable word and we need to think carefully about which institution uses the word green« (interview 2). Interviewees also cited legislation and the desire to earn money as motivators. »We have a policy in line with the ISO 14.001 environmental standard … which was committed to by the top management … we have rules of procedure, work instructions, organisational regulations, all in accordance with the requirements of this standard … we are fully compliant with the legislation« (interview 5).

Table 2: The motives behind environmentally responsible actions.

theme	sub-theme	category
motives	intrinsic motives	the importance of eating healthy local food of high quality.
		living in harmony with nature.
		being an example of best practice.
		job satisfaction and/or inspiration.
		raising awareness of others.
		caring for the environment and nature (recognised out of context).
	extrinsic motives	achieving the societal objectives of the green transition.
		highlighting differences and/or presenting alternatives.
		following trends.
		promotion.
		earnings.
		legislation

3.3 Communication

Effective communication is key to fostering transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement, which are critical for a successful transition to a green society. We were interested in how the companies communicate their exemplary actions. As we can see in Table 3, codes were grouped into categories and further into four sub-themes.

These eight companies adapt their communication to the target group in diverse ways. Almost half the interviewees highlighted communicating their activities or products online as an example of best practice, especially on social networks and by using digital marketing tools; five of them added the importance of direct online sales for their business. Four companies interviewed organise events and activities to communicate their best practices. Other media (television commercials, jumbo posters, word of mouth) were mentioned by up to two of the organisations interviewed. As a result, we find that it is the case for our interviewed organisations that social networks have been gaining in effectiveness for communication.

Five companies monitor the responses of those who use or are interested in their activities or products. The response monitoring is conducted in different ways: through a questionnaire, through the opinions of participants in the events that the organisations carry out, through a book of memories, and by monitoring the responses to posts on the online networks (they adapt their way of working according to the results). On the latter, the interviewee from company 8 said, »We are monitoring these things, we are also monitoring people's reactions, especially in terms of metrics, not how many people see the posts, and then we are trying to tailor these posts as much as possible to make them as easy to understand and simple as possible.« Interviewees pointed to various shortcomings in either the communication of their activities or the communication of the climate change crisis, sustainability, and corporate social (and environmental) responsibility.

Four of the companies interviewed thus cooperate with marketing experts or PR experts to communicate their activities. In addressing the shortcomings, interviewees pointed to the importance of proper communication and awareness-raising on climate change issues from primary education onwards. They believe that more emphasis should be placed on proper communication in public (e. g. in the media environment). One of the shortcomings pointed out by interviewee three is the lack of precision in terminology and that there are »loopholes in the law.

Table 3: Showcasing best practices among the companies.

theme	sub-theme	category
communication	tailoring to the target group	web, online
		social media
		live events and activities
		television commercials
		jumbo posters, flyers, and other promotional material
		spreading the good word
	consumer-oriented selling and marketing campaigns	online selling
		face to face
		major advertising campaigns
	monitoring responses	online analysis
		feedback
		communication with employees
	working with communication experts	working with marketing experts
		communication in education
		communication training
		with public
		eco-terminology

3.4 Future expectations

Next, we were interested in the expectations that companies have about what they would like/need to do in the future to prevent an environmental crisis. Identifying these challenges is a major step in developing strategies and policies that can support companies in their journey toward sustainability. As we can see in Table 4, codes were grouped in categories and further into four sub-themes.

A few interviewees gave their views on where they see opportunities for change in the way people behave towards nature. Some pointed out that issues and topics related to the protection of the environment and nature should be given more attention in primary schools. In this context, some explicitly pointed out that teachers should acquire the relevant competences: »I think it is very important to have this ambition, to give teachers the right basis, also to ensure that appropriate content is included in the curriculum, both nature conservation and environmental protection content.« (interview 2). Interviewee seven stressed the importance of state subsidies in the energy renovation of buildings. In his opinion, the subsidies in Slovenia should be higher. Several other interviewees also thought that the state should allocate more funds for companies to behave in an environmentally and socially responsible way. In addition to these, some interviewees also expressed the expectation that the government would support the removal of administrative barriers and that it would seek to establish cooperation between different sectors that otherwise strive for environmentally friendly actions.

As regards expectations towards people in general, almost half the interviewees pointed out changes in individual values. According to interviewees, people's prejudices against, e.g., organic farming, or plant-based diets need to be eliminated. The achievements of science should not be belittled. Three interviewees pointed to a change in the way communication is done to get relevant and professional information to the public.

Regarding changes being implemented in an environmentally friendly way, about a quarter of interviewees pointed to the establishment of a zero waste/circular economy system and an efficient packaging recycling system. Some of the expectations of companies or public institutions themselves are linked to their specific field of work.

4 Discussion

Our research highlights various best green practices among companies in the Podravska statistical region, their motivations for adopting these practices, and their communication strategies regarding the green transition. Interviewees often expressed pride in their companies' best practices, particularly in project orientation and training. Negative perceptions were rare, and, primarily concerned the slow rate of

Table 4: Expectations of interviewees.

theme	sub–theme (toward …)	category
future expectations	the country	obtaining and introducing certificates and statuses.
		removing administrative barriers.
		cooperation.
		government assistance in development and operations, e. g. grants.
	specific professions	changes in the education system.
		development of new technologies.
		establishing an effective way of communicating environmental protection and the green transition.
	people in general	changes in values.
		changes in the way of communication.
		social changes.
	interviewed companies	operating in an environmentally friendly way.
		company benefits.

change in social values, the gap between practice and theory, deficiencies in the recycling system, and inadequate governmental support.

Poljak Istenič (2019) and Godina Golija (2023) provide essential insights into practical sustainability initiatives in Slovenia, such as urban gardening projects and local food production strategies. These studies emphasize the role of community engagement and communication in fostering sustainability, which aligns with our findings that companies actively educate and raise awareness about environmental issues.

Most companies integrate energy efficiency and green energy practices into their operations. For example, three companies reported reducing energy consumption by using only green energy. These efforts are part of a broader commitment to environmental protection and resource optimization, echoing findings by Žabkar et al. (2022) that most Slovenian companies have dedicated personnel for corporate sustainability.

Intrinsic motivations, particularly eco-responsibility, drive these practices. Berry and Rondinelli (1998) and Bansal and Roth (2000) describe this motivation as rooted in a concern for preserving nature and promoting healthy, local food. Similarly, Li et al. (2020) highlight that intrinsic motivations foster green creativity and innovation, essential for developing sustainable products and services.

Our interviewees also discussed the importance of changing attitudes towards plant-based diets and socially responsible behaviour, reflecting a broader trend towards sustainability. Miscommunication and the misuse of eco-terminology for profit-making purposes were identified as significant issues. The emphasis on online communication and collaboration with marketing experts to promote green practices aligns with Dawkins's (2005) findings on the importance of employee-driven communication.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain, such as insufficient governmental support and slow societal change towards environmental responsibility. Many interviewees stressed the need for gradual changes and increased awareness among younger generations, which supports the need for sustained educational efforts.

5 Conclusion

The article examines best green practices among companies in the Podravska statistical region, focusing on their motivations, communication strategies, and expectations regarding the green transition. Most interviewed companies engage in educational activities and efficient energy use, and many use local materials. Intrinsic motives, particularly environmental preservation, drive these practices. Most companies communicate their activities online, with some collaborating with marketing experts. Interviewees view their environmentally responsible actions as standard practice, aligning with universal green transition goals. The survey revealed that all companies demonstrate at least partial social responsibility, with dedicated personnel for this purpose. A significant distinction exists between companies within the environmental economy sector and those outside it. The former are motivated by societal values, whereas the latter prioritize profits and reputation. Interviewees highlighted various national-level issues that hinder environmental initiatives, such as inadequate Zero Waste Economy policies and insufficient subsidies, for example.

To achieve corporate sustainability, it is essential for companies to integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) dimensions into their operations to enhance their reputation and build stronger relationships with stakeholders. Our research also reveals those intrinsic motivations, such as a genuine concern for environmental preservation and a commitment to offering high-quality, local products, are powerful drivers of sustainable practices. Companies should cultivate these intrinsic motivations among their leadership and employees to foster a culture of sustainability. This can be achieved by emphasizing the long-term benefits of environmental responsibility, such as enhanced job satisfaction, inspiration, and community recognition. Encouraging a values-driven approach to sustainability can lead to more innovative and resilient practices, as demonstrated by the companies in our study. Effective communication is crucial for raising awareness, engaging stakeholders, and promoting sustainable practices. Companies should tailor their communication strategies to their target audiences, utilizing various channels such as social media, online marketing, live events, and collaboration with marketing experts. Our research shows that companies that actively engage with their audience through transparent and accessible communication are better positioned to influence public perception and drive positive change.

Our research was designed to uncover the motivations for pursuing the environmental economy and the challenges faced by companies in this sector. The findings underscore the need for enhanced governmental support and public awareness to facilitate the green transition, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on corporate sustainability in Slovenia. As data provided by the European Commission in the Eurostat report 2024 show the slow growth of environmental economy companies in Slovenia, our findings shed light on these issues and present best practices that can facilitate the green transition.

6 References

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