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SUSTAINABILITY: WHEN? WHO? HOW?

History, actors (and instruments) of change

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of sustainability in its currently universally accepted meaning. After tracing the main social and political events (from the environmental movements of the 1960s-70s to the 2030 Agenda) that have made sustainability an increasingly urgent issue, while recognizing the different dimensions it involves (environmental, social and economic), the analysis focuses on the actors (citizens, institutions and businesses) in the transition process towards a sustainable development model. By examining the role assumed by the individual actors, above all in relation to the others, by virtue of their reciprocal conditioning, it comes to highlight how the path towards sustainability must take into account, and can at the same time be facilitated by the study of behavior and the deployment of tools (nudges) capable of stimulating them in the direction considered most appropriate for change. The paper concludes with the illustration of an empirical case of sustainability (Quid Project), declined in its three different dimensions and acted upon by all the actors involved, demonstrating the real possibility of conceiving (and not only adapting) the development model in a fully sustainable key.

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Introduction

Sustainability is a concept of a complex nature that presupposes a synergetic vision with respect to multiple factors: the dimensions to which it applies; the actors it involves; the time factor. Sustainability is, therefore, a concept that we can define as holistic.

Firstly, it is pointed out that in contemporary times, the notion of sustainability, originally limited to the environment, understood as the planet's natural resources as a whole, includes three different dimensions, environmental, economic and social, which are closely linked to each other and which interact with each other. When a factor impacts on a certain dimension, its action will, sooner or later, have positive or negative consequences on the others. Only a balance between the dimensions mentioned above can guarantee the long-term survival of the planet and humanity. In this regard, it is noted that, while on the one hand:

- social development and environmental protection combined make it possible to create a livable environment;
- social development in conjunction with economic development ensures a fair system;
- economic development in conjunction with environmental protection makes growth achievable;

on the other hand, it is clear that it is only the integration of all three dimensions that ensures sustainability, understood as the possibility of maintaining and prolonging over time an eco-system capable of producing value that can be translated into well-being for the community.

Secondly, it is important to understand that sustainability cannot be the result of isolated individual actions, as their positive effects would risk being nullified by the negative impacts of the behavior of others. Sustainability therefore requires a collective awareness capable of orienting the behavior of all stakeholders towards sustainable development, starting with individual citizens and ending with the involvement of institutions and businesses. From this point of view, too, we can identify a circular interaction in which the role of citizens becomes crucial in triggering change, going on to influence the policies

adopted by institutions and, together with these, the practices used by businesses, then becoming the recipients themselves, in an ideally virtuous circuit that is self-sustaining. With respect to this element (actors involved), however, it is important to highlight the existence of strong inequalities (between the various world populations and their respective political and economic systems, but also within individual national communities, at a territorial and/or social class level) that interfere with the effective dissemination of individual and collective awareness and/or the real possibility of adopting behavior in line with sustainable development at a global level.

Finally, the time factor is the element that truly qualifies the concept of sustainability, as the condition of a development capable of *ensuring the satisfaction of the needs of the present generation without compromising the possibility of future generations to realize their own*. In this regard, it should be noted that the growing urgency associated with the need to make man's actions sustainable stems from the realization that the traditional development model (adopted up until the last century) has caused damage capable of causing the collapse of the Earth's ecosystem; this has led to a progressive awareness of the fact that the decisions we take today and the actions resulting from them affect the quality of life of future generations. In light of this acknowledgement, sustainable development implies *a constant and preferably increasing well-being and the prospect of leaving future generations a quality of life that is not inferior to the present one*.

Notwithstanding the importance of each of the three factors outlined above (dimensions, actors, time), this paper sets out to analyze the concept of sustainability by focusing the investigation on the actors involved and how their behavior and interactions impact on the sustainability journey.

Starting (Chapter 1) from the exploration of the 'events' (individual initiatives, collective actions, social and economic policies, etc.) that have accompanied the growing attention to sustainability and the evolution of the related concept, the aim is pursued (in the following Chapters 2, 3 and 4) to answer the following questions:

- Who are the actors involved in the transition towards a sustainable development model?
- What is the role assumed by each of them?

- How can the interaction between the different actors trigger virtuous processes of change?

As previously mentioned, sustainability is the result of initiatives taken and actions performed by citizens, institutions and businesses; the body of the paper intends to highlight how the role of the leading actor is assumed by citizens, without, however, falling into the error of relegating institutions and businesses to the role of extras, given that the interaction between the three categories mentioned determines a reciprocal conditioning of their respective behaviors, with a consequent reversal of the roles assumed. Precisely because of the centrality assumed in the analysis by the 'behavior' of the various actors, the paper also examines the concept of nudging and the importance it can assume in any process of behavioral transition, and therefore, also in the path towards the sustainability of the economic model.

A Nudge ('gentle push') can be defined as a strategy for influencing people's choices in a non-coercive manner, seeking to guide their behavior through the design of the decision-making context. This concept, introduced by the founders of the relevant theory (Richard Thaler & Cass Sunstein, 'Nudge - The Gentle Push, 2009'), is characterized by the following elements:

- aims to change behavior in a predictable manner, thus in the desired direction, and not to change opinions and attitudes;
- it must be easily avoidable, thus not coming into conflict with individual freedom;
- does not provide an economic reward or incentive;
- does not envisage punishment or prohibition;
- it is aimed at prompting people to make better choices, thereby safeguarding themselves and, as an ultimate goal, improving collective well-being.

On the subject of sustainability, according to the theory under consideration, directing citizens' behavior by exposing them to more or less implicit stimuli (rather than by going through the channel of legislation) guarantees greater effectiveness of public policies, as well as of the initiatives that, in this sphere, are taken by the business world.

The research will adopt a qualitative approach, bringing together the most recent theories and analyses on the subject of 'sustainability' from the point of view of each of the actors involved, so as to contribute to the identification of the actions that can most effectively contribute to promoting the change necessary for sustainable development.

Chapter 1 -Background of sustainability

Towards the modern concept of sustainability

Although the growing interest in the impact of man's actions on the environment has its origins in the decades immediately following the Industrial Revolution, it was the environmental movements of the 1970s that gave impetus to the modern concept of sustainability and began to make their voices heard, thus spreading an initial common awareness of the inadequacy of the development system adopted up to then in guaranteeing the effective growth of the planet.

In particular, after the Second World War, ecological associations and movements (which had already sprung up in the second half of the 19th century) began to take on a larger and more widespread role on a global scale, for the following reasons:

- the propagation, in at least one third of the Earth, of those production methods and consumption patterns, beginning with motorization, that most profoundly change the quality of life and most seriously threaten the natural balance;
- the explosion, on a planetary scale, of the demographic problem;
- the emergence of some major problems with strong ecological impact, such as energy production and waste disposal.

Consequently, major environmental issues take on a stringent topicality and manifest their weight directly on the daily lives of citizens.

A series of accidents and disasters then definitively remarked the distortion in the relations between man and territory, between industry and nature: the toxic gas leaks from the chemical industries in Seveso, Lombardy, in 1976, and then the catastrophic one in Bhopal, India, in 1984; the Three Mile Island nuclear accidents in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in March 1979; and the one, of epochal proportions, that took place in April 1986 in Černobyl, Soviet Ukraine; the sinking of the Exxon-Valdez oil tanker in Alasca in 1989 are dramatic transitions along which sensitivity to the problems insistently denounced by environmental groups has grown on a global scale.

Growing awareness on the part of citizens can only be followed by progressive acknowledgement on the part of the political, scientific and economic world, which since the 1970s has adopted a series of initiatives increasingly oriented toward making the planet's development sustainable.

It was precisely in **1970** that the **World Earth Day** was established on April 22; in **1972** the Club of Rome, founded in 1968, published the Report on the Limits to Development, better known as the **Meadows Report**, which raised important questions about the consequences of unlimited economic development on a planet with limited resources. This document has a significant impact, helping to introduce the concept of sustainability to the global agenda.

In the same year, the **Stockholm Conference** is held, attended by more than 100 different governments and hundreds of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); for the first time, the environmental crisis is brought as a topic of discussion at international diplomatic tables. It is concluded that economic development is putting unprecedented pressure on natural resources and ecosystems.

In the following years the UN also began to take direct action on the issue. In **1973**, indeed, UNEP, the **United Nations Environment Program** was established, dedicated specifically to combating climate change and protecting natural resources.

The 1973 international oil crisis further draws public attention, highlighting the strong interdependence of the environmental crisis with socio-economic crises. Among the actions taken consequently by institutions, it should be noted that in Italy, for example, the position of Minister of the Environment was established in 1974, which was not followed until 1986 by the respective ministry.

The year **1987** represents a key date due to the publication of the Brundtland Report, renowned as "**Our Common Future**", prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development, which contains the most famous definition of sustainable development: *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. The importance of understanding the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being for both present and

future generations is thus highlighted. So, initially focused on the issue of environmental sustainability, the debate broadens for the first time to embrace a more inclusive view that also considers the social and economic aspects of actions and decisions taken. Thus it is with the Brundtland Report that the three pillars of sustainability are introduced: environmental, social and economic, commonly known as ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance).

In **1992**, the Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, resulting in three major treaties with environmental impact: the first addressing the danger of global warming; the second directed at the protection of biodiversity; and the third on the urgency of combating the degradation of fertile soils and desertification. The Rio Summit is also remembered for the speech made by Severn Cullis-Suzuki, a young girl of only 12 who captured the attention of world leaders on the crucial issue of environmental protection. Daughter of a geneticist and a writer, Severn tackles the environmental issue with innovative language, describing it as a heavy legacy that present generations are leaving to future ones: *“Hello, I’m Severn Suzuki [...] I am afraid to go out in the sun now because of the holes in our ozone. I am afraid to breathe the air because I don't know what chemicals are in it. I used to go fishing in Vancouver, my home, with my dad, until just a few years ago we found the fish full of cancers. And now we hear of animals and plants going extinct every day, vanishing forever. In my life, I have dreamt of seeing the great herds of wild animals, jungles, and rainforests full of birds and butterflies, but now I wonder if they will even exist for my children to see. Did you have to worry of these things when you were my age? All this is happening before our eyes, and yet we act as if we have all the time we want and all the solutions. [...] If you don't know how to fix it, please stop breaking it!”*¹. It must be noted, however, that although its intervention inspires many people to a greater commitment to environmental protection, it does not bring about significant changes in the immediate future. The effects of the conference are, however, undeniable and long-lasting; in fact, it gave rise to the **COP project**, which provides for annual meetings organized by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where the world's governments come together to discuss and negotiate actions to tackle climate change, which also led to the signing of the **Kyoto Protocol in 1997**. The latter

¹ Fabrizio De Odorico - ^{FDONET}.COM. (n.d.). Salviamo la nostra Terra - Save our Earth (Heart).

historic agreement, which only came into force in 2005, sets binding targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, marking a crucial step forward in the fight against climate change and paving the way for a new global awareness of the urgency of taking action to protect our planet.

The beginning of the new millennium saw the definition of real sustainable development goals; at the Millennium Summit, the United Nations outlined the so-called 8 MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), focused on reducing poverty rates and maternal and child mortality, increasing the level of schooling and sanitization to combat epidemic diseases. These goals will later evolve into the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) defined in the year of the long-awaited and much-needed **sustainability revolution**, the **2015**, destined to be remembered as the year of full awareness and assumption of responsibility, as attested to by three epoch-making events, which, in ascending order of importance are: the Paris Agreement; Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*; and the drafting of the 2030 Agenda.

The Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement represents a major step forward in the fight against climate change. Signed by 196 countries, in December 2015, during the Conference of the Parties (COP21) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the agreement aims to limit the rise in global average temperature to well below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels, with an even more ambitious goal of containing the increase to within 1.5°C., given the devastating impacts that even a relatively modest rise in temperature could have on the environment, biodiversity and human communities worldwide.

Key elements of the Paris Agreement are the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which are the national plans through which each country commits to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. These plans, formulated and communicated by individual member states, represent a concrete commitment to reduce the impact of human activities on the global climate. Each country pledges to submit its NDCs and review them periodically to increase ambition and align with the goals of the Paris Agreement.

This historic agreement leads to the adoption of concrete actions worldwide, encouraging investment in renewable energy, promoting research and development of clean technologies, and activating the transformation to a low-carbon economy. Moreover, it stimulates greater public awareness of the risks and opportunities related to climate change, encouraging greater participation of civil society and businesses in adopting more sustainable behavior and advocacy for more ambitious and consistent climate policies.

A further important aspect of the Paris Agreement is that it recognizes the importance of international cooperation in achieving climate goals. Indeed, it promotes the transfer of technology and finance from developed to developing countries to help the latter adopt more sustainable practices and adapt to climate change already underway. This inclusive approach reflects the recognition that climate change is a global challenge that requires collective and solidarity-based solutions.

The contents of the Agreement, as summarized above, reinforce the role of the United Nations as the institution capable of coordinating global efforts to address climate change, emphasizing the importance of international dialogue and multilateral cooperation.

Laudato Si'

Following the intervention of Paul VI, who, on the 25th anniversary of the FAO in 1970, emphasized *the urgency and necessity of an almost radical change in behavior if it is to ensure its survival*, the initiatives of John Paul II, who in 1979 elected St Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of humanity's ecologists and subsequently introduced an early version of the concept of integral ecology, further developed by Pope Benedict XVI, Francis published the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* in June 2015, an important document that focuses on caring for the natural environment and people, as well as broader issues of the relationship between God, human beings and the Earth.

With this text, the Pope calls for action to protect the planet and put an end to poverty and social injustice, reaffirming the importance of an integral approach that takes into account the multiple interconnections between human beings and the natural environment. In particular, the encyclical first examines environmental problems (*chapter one: What is happening to our house*), including in it pollution, climate change, water scarcity, loss of

biodiversity, and global inequality, and then points out that past attempts to justify absolute human dominance over other species "are not a correct interpretation of the Bible" (*chapter two: The Gospel of Creation*); it then goes on to examine (*chapter three: The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis*) the attitudes that have led to environmental problems (the misguided use of technology, the tendency to manipulate and control nature, a view of human beings as a species separate from the environment) in order to develop the concept already introduced by his predecessors (*chapter four: An Integral Ecology*), namely that the main solution is the need to consider the interactions of *natural systems with each other and with social systems*, introducing the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the relationship between human beings and the world of nature, drawing on culture, family, community, virtue, religion and respect for the common good. Finally, the encyclical identifies actions to be taken, both at the level of institutions (*chapter five: Some Lines of Guidance and Action*) - international agreements to protect the environment and assist low-income countries, new national and local policies, inclusive and transparent decision-making processes, and an economy ordered to the good of all - and of individual citizens (*chapter six: Education and Ecological Spirituality*) - a lifestyle less focused on consumerism and more on timeless and enduring values; hence the importance of faith and the active participation of people of faith in community governance.

Fundamental to the encyclical is the reflection that efforts to reduce the impact of economic development on the environment cannot be an alternative to efforts to help people in poverty, as the two goals constitute a unified project: rich countries must take the lead in reducing their emissions and provide funds to developing countries, which are also those suffering the worst effects of climate change, so that they can do the same. The encyclical states that *there are not two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but a single, complex socio-environmental crisis. The directions for the solution require an integrated approach to combat poverty, to restore dignity to the excluded and at the same time to care for nature.*

This document has inspired concrete actions around the world, from local sustainability initiatives to national and international policies to combat climate change and preserve biodiversity. *Laudato Si'* continues to be a source of inspiration and guidance for

individuals, communities and political leaders in their quest for a more equitable, sustainable and inclusive future.

2030 Agenda

In 2012, on the 20th anniversary of Rio 1992, it became clear that the three multilateral environmental agreements remained unrealized. The United Nations member states therefore decided to expand the scope of the Millennium Development Goals and adopted the **Sustainable Development Goals** with the intention of directing political and social mobilization beyond the fight against poverty, towards sustainable development. After three years of negotiation, in September 2015, the more than 190 countries present at the United Nations General Assembly approved the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, which became the new global reference framework for national and international efforts to find common solutions to the planet's great challenges, such as extreme poverty, climate change, environmental degradation and health crises.

The Agenda, from the Latin verb *agere*, meaning 'to do', outlines the priorities to be achieved by 2030; it is divided into 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which in turn are structured into 169 actions.

The elements that distinguish the SDGs are three:

- 1) they are **universal** as they refer to problems that are common to all nations. Unlike the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), which were addressed to developing countries, the SDGs are addressed to all countries of the world without any distinction between developed, emerging and developing countries. This means that each country must commit itself to defining its own sustainable development strategy, to coordinating policies aimed at achieving the Agenda, and to introducing monitoring and control mechanisms in order to achieve the SDGs and report its results to the UN;
- 2) they are based on five essential areas (the **5 P's**):
 - **People:** combating poverty and social exclusion and promoting health and well-being to ensure the conditions for the development of human capital;
 - **Planet:** ensuring sustainable management of natural resources, counteracting the loss of biodiversity and protecting environmental and cultural assets;

- **Prosperity:** affirming sustainable models of production and consumption, guaranteeing employment and quality training;
 - **Peace:** promoting a non-violent and inclusive society, free of discrimination. Combatting lawlessness;
 - **Partnership:** intervening in the various areas in an integrated manner.
- 3) they adopt an **integrated vision** of sustainability in its three dimensions:
- **Environmental sustainability:** stems from the observation that natural capital, such as land, water, air or minerals, is not inexhaustible and that, therefore, its use must pay attention to maintaining the capacity of natural resources to reproduce continuously, so as to ensure that the needs of the present population are fully met, without at the same time compromising the needs of future populations;
 - **Social sustainability:** refers to the ability to create and maintain a fair and inclusive society for all people in the long term. This implies that all people must have access to fundamental rights such as education, health, decent employment and sufficient income, so that equal opportunities are guaranteed to all individuals, and it also presupposes the protection of all diversity, so as to address inequalities and combat discrimination;
 - **Economic sustainability:** consists in the ability of an economic system to generate lasting growth, providing income and employment for the population. It requires the adoption of economic policies and practices that foster long-term value creation.

It should be emphasized that the fundamental guiding principle of the 2030 Agenda is to leave no-one behind. Indeed, it contains an explicit commitment for states to take into account the difficulties of developing or disadvantaged countries due to their economic situation or geographical location, establishing a real collective duty to cooperate and help each other, with particular support for states in difficulty.

Chapter 2 - Citizen and sustainability

The citizen as actor of change

It was the 1960s and 1970s that created the conditions for the emergence of the concept of sustainability as an antithesis to the model of unlimited development, challenged by the realization of the negative effects produced by continuous growth. Author and actor of the process of change initiated in those years is, unquestionably, the citizen, not in the guise of "single individual" but as part of unorganized groups to which non-institutionalized forms of expression are traced. At the instigation of intellectuals and scholars, collective interest is kindled on environmental issues, but also on issues such as social justice and the rights of the oppressed, leading to the emergence of movements capable of raising public awareness and exerting pressure on government policies.

In this sense, the citizen, in its collective sense, must be recognized as the "fuse capable of triggering change": the environmental issue and the subsequent broader issue of the sustainability of the growth model arise outside institutions, by individuals and groups seeking consensus and participation with the ultimate goal of keeping attention high on threats to the survival of the planet.

Analyzing the events following the 1960s and 1970s (see 1.1 Background of sustainability), however, it must be acknowledged that, although they chart a course toward the greater sustainability of Man's action, even today no real changes are discernible, since the initiatives concretely undertaken in the face of countless "declarations of intent" cannot be configured as true reversals of course. In this context, the awareness about the importance of the role exercised by the citizen is reflected in the periodic renewal of the propulsive thrust of collective movements, among which the latest in order of time is Fridays for Future - born starting in 2018 thanks to the solitary initiatives of Greta Thunberg - which has launched a new season of public awareness, calling all the actors involved and, in particular, the institutions to the commitments they have undertaken.

Identikit of the sustainable citizen

In attributing the role of "actors of change" to citizens, it is necessary to recognize differences, even substantial ones, in the attitude taken toward ecological and social challenges, as a clear division can be observed between those who promote the principles of sustainability, acting as "activists," those who embrace said principles, adopting lifestyles consonant with them ("sustainable citizens"), and, finally, those who show no concern for the issues addressed in this paper. This difference reflects a complex intersection of demographic, socio-economic, cultural and educational factors that influence people's perceptions and actions.

Wanting to identify characteristics that unite members of the first two groups (activists and sustainable citizens), it is first necessary to point out how interest in the environment and widespread social development has always taken on an elitist character. It is, in fact, individuals with high incomes and medium to high levels of education who have nurtured the earliest forms of interest in sustainability and those who still manifest a greater propensity for behavior consistent with safeguarding the planet. Consider, for example, the establishment of "World Earth Day," whose authors present profiles that, although differentiated, show common traits traceable to the same social class: the initiative was, in fact, promoted by John McConnell, an American journalist and environmentalist, proclaimed by lawyer Gaylord Nelson, a U.S. senator, and made an event of international character by Stanford scholar Denis Hayes.

At the same time, a female portrait emerges in the sustainability picture, as evidenced by the pioneering role taken by women such as marine biologist, Rachel Carson, who in 1962 published *Silent Spring*, the sacred text of American environmentalism; Gro Harlem Brundtland, who in 1987, as chair of the U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development, produced the "Our Common Future" Report, considered one of the cornerstones of sustainable development; Wangari Muta Maathai, the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for "her contribution to the causes of sustainable development."

In coherence with what has been described above, the identikit of the sustainable citizen resulting from research carried out with reference to the Italian context highlights the

preponderant role of women in the journey towards sustainability, with interesting regional and demographic nuances. Indeed, from the data that emerged (The identikit of the eco-sustainable citizen by Daniela Finamore 2011) it appears that women from Northern Italy, again with a medium-high educational qualification, show a greater propensity to adopt green behaviors in their daily lives.

Focusing, finally, on the more recent past, we find that it is young people who are driving sustainability awareness. Following Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, Generation Z (born since 1995) considers sustainability a global priority (69% of the 1,100 18-26 year olds surveyed as part of the In a Bottle study), which primarily relates to environmental issues (41%), but also extends to the food field (32%), with the fight against waste, and to the social sphere (17%) with reference to the need to ensure access to basic necessities on a global scale. The most common daily practices for this generation refer to: mobility (58 percent), with more and more young people using low environmental impact means such as bicycles and scooters; recycling (51 percent), according to the philosophy of the three "R's" (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle); smart use of resources in the home (47 percent), through reducing the use of household appliances and running water when not necessary; and the food supply chain (39 percent), with a preference for made-in-Italy foods and dishes typical of local traditions.

The awareness of the citizen

But what have been the overall effects produced by sustainability activists in terms of raising public awareness? What is the positioning of citizens today with respect to environmental and social issues? To answer these questions, it is necessary to analyze the results of some significant research carried out on the subject, which arrive at essentially the same results, attesting to their veracity.

Focusing on the country Italy, it is noted that, based on a survey conducted in 2023 ("The Culture of Sustainability in Italy" by *Esg culture lab*, an observatory on human capital launched by *Eikon strategic consulting Italia* in collaboration with *Adnkronos group*) on a sample of 1,600 people between 18 and 65 years old, 97 % of Italians say they have heard of sustainability, but only 59% know about Agenda 2030. However, a partial view of sustainability emerges from the research, which is associated almost exclusively with

the environmental dimension and revolves mainly around recycling and energy; in this regard, three quarters of the people surveyed say they adopt, in their daily lives, some sustainable habits, and half of the people consider positive the measures taken by institutions to increase energy efficiency and make renewable energy sources more accessible. Awareness with respect to social sustainability, on the other hand, emerges only in the face of specific questions, with respect to which the strong presence of "don't know" in the answers shows a difficulty in perceiving this dimension of sustainability to which most of the goals indicated by the 2030 Agenda refer: people perceive themselves to be less involved in social goals and on these aspects even with respect to organizations and institutions they attribute less positive judgments.

The analysis conducted in 2022 by Deloitte as part of the Observatory "The Conscious Citizen" (2.000 cases interviewed during the summer of 2022; the target group consists of Italian residents aged 18 to 75 years old, to whom quotas were set - according to ISTAT - by geographic area, gender and age group) already highlighted the above, noting that among the main fears of the citizen for the future, climate change is perceived by 36% of respondents as one of the main threats to be addressed in the short term, with an even greater urgency than the protection of their own health (31%).

The research conducted then highlights how citizens identify their contribution to the survival of the Planet in changing their habits, with particular reference to: reducing and recycling waste (78 % of respondents); reducing energy waste and consumption of depletable resources such as water (77% of the sample); limiting purchases compared to actual needs (64%); and improving nutrition through organic products from certified supply chains (40%).

Finally, the analysis activated by Asvis (Italian Association for Sustainable Development) in order to measure the level of citizens' awareness and perception about the importance of the Agency 2030 goals (1,200 interviews carried out in the period April-May 2022 on a representative sample of the Italian population aged between 16 and 65), in addition to sharing the findings of the previously mentioned analyses, highlights the following: central or local government bodies are identified as being directly responsible for achieving the sustainability goals; a central role is also recognized for large companies,

both directly and in influencing consumer behavior; and awareness is beginning to mature (a quarter of Italians) that achieving the goals of Agenda 2030 is everyone's responsibility.

The "virtuous behaviors" of the sustainable citizen

What are the behaviors that enable citizens to be not simply consumers, but consume-authors (Asvis: "Decalogues to be concretely sustainable in everyday life arrive" by Flavia Belladonna, July 2017), that is, "citizens who do not intend to give up a good lifestyle but behave in a way that allows everyone to make the best use of natural resources while leaving future generations with an environment at least no worse than the one they found"?

Over time and by different parties, a variety of decalogues have been outlined to provide advice to the citizen so as to be sustainable in everyday life. The good habits indicated by them are basically the same and can be traced to the following themes:

- 1) *Water*: reduce consumption through thrifty use (e.g., shorter showers and turning off faucets while brushing teeth);
- 2) *Energy*: save electricity (e.g., buy efficient appliances and use energy-efficient light bulbs);
- 3) *Air*: do not waste thermal energy to avoid producing large amounts of CO₂ (e.g., optimize space heating/cooling by closing windows with heating running or excluding unused rooms);
- 4) *Food*: avoid waste (e.g., buy only the food you need and consume, expiring products first) and support natural production or production with reduced environmental impact (e.g., prefer organic, natural and zero-mile products and packaging made from recyclable material);
- 5) *Waste*: practicing recycling (e.g., recovering items for disposal) and separate collection (e.g., taking special waste to the landfill);

- 6) *Home*: choose certified wood furniture from sustainably managed forests and use natural cleaning products (e.g., water and vinegar solutions);
- 7) *Mobility*: Reduce fuel emissions by preferring sustainable means of transportation (public transportation, bicycles, etc.) and using the car responsibly (e.g., turning off the engine in case of traffic jams, maintaining a driving speed);
- 8) *Health*: opt for a varied diet with increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes and plant proteins, have regular checkups to prevent disease, do not use drugs unless prescribed by a doctor, adopt healthy lifestyles (do not smoke, do not overuse alcohol, exercise).

Obstacles and resistances

The awareness about the importance of sustainability of citizens' actions is a key step toward a more responsible future. However, this awareness alone is not sufficient to ensure meaningful and positive change. The path to a more sustainable lifestyle may, in fact, encounter a number of obstacles identifiable in forms of resistance to habit change, but also in conditions of social inequality that prevent the effective adoption of eco-friendly practices.

There are, first of all, cognitive and behavioral obstacles, such as lack of time, rejection of anything that involves extra effort, and sometimes lack of interest in the topic of sustainability, which can make it difficult for people to change their habits and adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. Changing habits to achieve a goal perceived as vague, far off in time, may appear too strenuous and complex; in fact, individuals tend to prioritize immediate desires over long-term goals.

As a publication by the Cariplo Foundation points out (Moratti A. (2020), *Nudging Techniques in the Environmental Context - A Review of Experiences and Results*. Milan), it is well known that "despite the fact that environmental issues have been the subject of specific policies for decades, people's behaviors continue to be rather resistant to change. As an example, suffice it to say that in almost all *OECD countries between 70 percent and 80 percent of respondents say they are informed and in favor of sustainable consumption, but only small minorities (3 percent to 5 percent) sign contracts for energy*

supplies from renewable sources or buy products with a lower environmental impact (Codagnone et al., 2016). Thus, there is a gap to be bridged between degree of environmental awareness and the actions actually implemented."

The above resistances, which can be traced to the attitudes of individual citizens, is also fueled by objective obstacles: the availability and accessibility of sustainable products (from both an environmental and health perspective) may be limited. Often, such products are not as widely distributed as traditional ones, which can make it more difficult for consumers to find them.

Similarly, the lack of certified and reliable information on sustainability is another critical issue. Although more and more people want to make more sustainable choices, the lack of timely and credible data on different products means that consumers may not be able to make informed choices.

It must, however, be acknowledged that among the objective obstacles to the adoption of sustainable behavior the main one is economic. A key aspect is the fact that products that are more compatible with respect for the environment and a healthy lifestyle tend to have a higher price than conventional alternatives. This is because of the higher production costs associated with them, attributable to the greater care they require and/or the lower guaranteed yields, as is the case with agricultural products, or the adoption of more innovative and therefore more expensive technologies, as is the case with the latest energy-saving products. What happens is that the additional costs of sustainable goods are mostly passed on to end consumers through higher prices. Consequently, for segments of the population with limited financial resources, the purchase of sustainable products is beyond their economic possibilities and is perceived as a real luxury that cannot be included in daily habits. In the area of sustainability, those who, despite having awareness of virtuous behaviors, as well as a desire to adopt them, have low incomes are, therefore, at a disadvantage; in this case, the obstacle descends no longer from a form of resistance but from a real inequality, capable of leading to a social division, in which people with higher incomes are more likely to adhere to sustainable practices, while those with lower incomes may feel excluded. The effect on quality of life can also be significant, going to exacerbate the existing inequality between social classes: people who cannot afford sustainable products may be forced to choose alternatives that, in the long run, could have

a negative impact on health and physical well-being, leading to greater vulnerability than those with greater financial resources. It becomes, therefore, essential to make sustainable products more accessible, i.e., affordable and easily identifiable for all consumers, in order to reduce social inequalities in the transition to sustainability, so as to ensure that it is not a privilege reserved for the few, but a shared and attainable condition for all.

In this process, the citizen is no longer an "active agent of change" but is subjected to the decisions and consequent actions of the other actors involved: businesses have a crucial role, since they are responsible for producing and marketing sustainable products and services, making them an integral part of the normal process of production and consumption; institutions, on the other hand, must play a guiding role, adopting policies (through prohibitions, limitations, incentives, etc.) capable of impacting the actions of businesses and encouraging the adoption of sustainable practices by individuals.

Chapter 3 - Institutions and sustainability

The guiding role of the institutions

It is on the back of the alarm raised in the last decades of the last century by more or less organized groups in civil society that institutions have entered the sustainability game. The growing awareness of the risks associated with the current model of development for the survival of the planet has confronted institutions with the need to realize the urgency of change. As reported in Chapter 1, this fueled a slow but gradual process of accountability that passed through the organization of events and the signing of agreements and resulted in the 2030 Agenda in 2015.

Starting, therefore, from an initial role of listening to and taking on board the requests promoted by civil society, institutions of various kinds (supranational and national, governmental and non-governmental bodies, etc.) have progressively become pro-active subjects, assuming a dual function: 1) to amplify awareness and sensitivity on sustainability issues, spreading information and knowledge through the various initiatives adopted (events of global resonance, agreements on specific issues, etc.) and contaminating even those who were not actively involved in initiating the process of change; 2) to direct with respect to the priorities to be addressed and identify the consequent actions to be undertaken, making commitments in terms of objectives to be achieved and adopting measures aimed at pursuing them.

Considering the 2030 Agenda as the end point of the evolutionary process that has affected institutions and, at the same time, as the starting point for the implementation of concrete actions for sustainable development, it is significant to analyze the main initiatives adopted since 2015, focusing on our political context (EU and Italian government).

The European Union's Initiatives

At the European level, already in 2016 the communication presented by the European Commission ‘Next Steps for a Sustainable European Future’ (COM(2016) 739) outlines two strands of activity:

- integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the European strategic framework and the Commission's priorities;
- launching a reflection to further develop a longer-term vision in a post-2020 perspective.

Then, in June 2017, the new ‘European Consensus for Development’ was adopted, setting out a common framework of actions for the EU institutions and Member States regarding development policy and with particular reference to cross-cutting themes (gender equality, youth, sustainable energy, mobility, migration, etc.), emphasizing in particular the need to: intensify EU and Member States’ joint programming and cooperation on development in order to increase their overall impact; promote EU and Member States’ partnerships with civil society organizations; and ensure the active involvement of local authorities in order to effectively achieve sustainable development objectives.

On 30 January 2019, with its Reflection Paper on the 2030 Agenda, the European Commission identifies a number of crucial ‘enabling’ factors to facilitate the transition to a sustainable Europe, including²:

- education, training, science, technology, research, innovation and digitalization (artificial intelligence is looked at with interest as a resource to increase productivity in sectors such as health, agriculture);
- finance, pricing, taxation and competition (tax and pricing systems that take into account the environmental and social costs of production to ensure the affordability of sustainable products/services);
- corporate social responsibility to foster more sustainable growth and profits, new market opportunities and employment.

In November 2019, the European Parliament declares a climate emergency; a few days later, the Commission presents a new strategy, called the ‘European green deal’, aimed at making Europe's commitment to achieving climate neutrality a reality. While taking its

² CAMERA DEI DEPUTATI XVIII Legislatura, Documentazione per le Commissioni Attività Dell’unione Europea, Recenti iniziative dell’Unione europea sull’Agenda 2030 per lo sviluppo sostenibile n. 6 18 febbraio 2019

cue from the 2030 Agenda, the document identifies additional, more ambitious goals, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. In order to ensure equity and inclusiveness in the transition to climate neutrality, the European Commission (COM(2020) 14 final of 14 January 2020 ‘A strong social Europe for just transitions’) relaunches the European Pillar of Social Rights already proclaimed in November 2017, indicating a program of actions to be taken with reference to those goals of the 2030 Agenda not already directly considered in the Green Deal (equal opportunities and access to work; fair working conditions; social protection and inclusion) and identifying the digital transition as a cross-cutting theme among the initiatives.

Finally, sustainable transition is placed at the center of the plans to revive the economies of European countries after the pandemic crisis. In May 2020 (COM(2020)442 final ‘The EU budget as a driver for the European Recovery Plan’), the ‘Next Generation EU’ instrument was introduced with the aim of financing the economic recovery of EU Member States affected by the COVID-19 crisis. With a total allocation of EUR 750 billion, member states wishing to benefit from grants and funding are required to draw up national plans (reform and investment programs) consistent with the objectives of a green, just and inclusive transition. The economic recovery of European countries from the great crisis caused by the pandemic thus becomes an opportunity to elaborate a fully sustainable development model through the identification of actions capable of declining at national level the 17 Goals set by the 2030 Agenda.

The Italian Government's Initiatives

At the level of Italy, starting in 2016, the government decided to update the sustainable development strategy using the 2030 Agenda as a reference framework and thus extending it beyond the purely environmental dimensions, to which the previous strategy was limited. Approved in October 2017, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development, which outlines the guidelines for economic, social and environmental policies aimed at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, is structured in five areas of intervention, corresponding to the ‘5Ps’ of sustainable development proposed by the 2030 Agenda, each of which contains Strategic Choices and Strategic

Objectives for Italy, related to the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (Ref. Chapter 1 - *2030 Agenda*).

An important step for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Italy is represented by the 2017 Budget Law. It is, in fact, presented together with a grid associating the measures envisaged within the law with the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda. This is a very significant initiative in terms of the country's political culture, helping to put it on the path of sustainable development³.

Italy, moreover, the first EU and G7 country, introduces with Law 163/2016 the so-called Equitable and Sustainable Wellbeing (BES) indicators, i.e. indicators aimed at measuring the results of public policies in the light of parameters other than strictly economic ones and which have a close relevance to some of the main objectives and targets of the 2030 Agenda (e.g. Absolute Poverty Index; Excess Weight; Early Exit from the Education and Training System; Efficiency of the Civil Justice System; Emissions of CO₂ and other climate-altering gases, etc.).

Also testifying to the importance attributed to the pursuit of the Agenda 2030 goals are the choices made at the level of governance of sustainability policies: with the directive of the President of the Council of Ministers of 16 March 2018, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers is entrusted with the coordination of the actions and policies inherent to the implementation of the strategy, also with reference to the phase of monitoring and verification of the progress towards the Agenda 2030 goals⁴.

Another important aspect is the incorporation in the Italian Constitution of fundamental principles for safeguarding the environment and protecting future generations (ASviS - Sustainable development arrives in the Constitution, ASviS applauds the result - February 2022). Constitutional Law No. 1 of 2022 introduces a new paragraph to Article 9 of the Constitution, in order to recognize the principle of protecting the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems, also in the interest of future generations, attributing to the Republic the protection of these aspects as well. At the same time, Article 41 of the

³ Alleanza Italiana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile. (n.d.).

⁴ CAMERA DEI DEPUTATI XVIII Legislatura, Documentazione e ricerche, L'agenda globale per lo sviluppo sostenibile Aprile 2022

Constitution on the exercise of economic initiative is amended, establishing that private economic initiative may not be carried out to the detriment of health and the environment and reserving to the law the possibility of directing and coordinating economic activity, both public and private, for purposes that are not only social but also environmental.

Current government policies for sustainable transition have been fully implemented in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRP) adopted to address the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Plan, prepared with the aim of accessing the aforementioned 'Next Generation EU' program, envisages investments and reforms to be implemented in a sustainable manner. While noting that 3 (Mission 2: Green Revolution and Ecological Transition; Mission 3: Sustainable Infrastructure and Mobility; Mission 5: Inclusion and Cohesion) of the 6 Missions into which it is divided explicitly refer to some of the main objectives of the 2030 Agenda, it is important to point out that the entire Plan is governed by a series of principles that cut across the various Missions, which, introduced with the NRP, will hopefully be applied to all future investment programs contribution to the digital transition (measured by means of special tagging) and to the ecological transition (DNSH principle - Do Not Significant Harm), guarantee of equal generational, gender (training and female youth employment targets to 2026) and territorial (reduction of the North-South divide: no less than 40% of the Plan's resources must be allocated to the South). These principles incorporate globally recognized priorities to make the development model sustainable.

The instruments available to the institutions

The instruments used by institutions to give substance to the transition towards a development model compatible with the survival of the planet are multiple.

a. Command and control policies

The first option⁵ is represented by 'obligations and prohibitions', which consist of an imposition from above with sanctions to be applied in the event of non-compliance. One thinks, in this regard, of the differentiated waste collection introduced progressively by all local administrations, even though only some of them have equipped themselves with

⁵ BERARDI Donato, IVOI Irene, TETTAMANZI Michele, Scelte individuali e azione collettiva: i nudge nella transizione ecologica

control instruments capable of allowing the application of the pecuniary sanctions envisaged, or of the Merli Law (Law No. 319 of 10 May 1976) concerning water protection and containing the list of substances considered pollutants, to whose unauthorized discharge criminal sanctions have been associated. The limitation of this instrument, beyond the fact that it requires a great deal of energy and resources for controls, is represented by the risk of transforming what should be a participatory process into a restriction of freedom from which individuals try to escape.

b. Incentive policies

The second option is that suggested by economic-rational models, according to which one behavior is adopted to the detriment of another, if the same is able to guarantee a greater economic advantage. These models form the basis of monetary incentives to encourage the adoption of eco-sustainable behavior. An example in this sense is the tax deduction that can be applied for building work aimed at improving⁶ the energy efficiency of a house (think of the 110% bonus instituted by the Italian government), i.e. a rule that introduces higher costs for not adopting ‘green’ behavior, such as increased taxes for vehicles of worse polluting classes.’ Surveys of these incentive-disincentive forms show, however, that only a minority of the population is sensitive to these actions. Another disadvantage of this type of instrument is its inability to have a definitive or at least lasting impact on the behavior of the recipients, who in the presence of incentives-disincentives make a choice dictated not by the intention of making an eco-sustainable purchase but only by the attempt to achieve economic savings; consequently, when the incentive (due to lack of funds) or disincentive (due to its unpopularity) is no longer available, it is unlikely that the most ecological choice will remain.

c. Information and communication

A third option is offered by actions that we could define as ‘cultural’: awareness-raising, education and training paths, especially towards the youngest, which are decisive in building an awareness of the problem. Examples include the ‘#iosonoAmbiente Program’ set up by the Italian government in 2019 and aimed at schools of all levels for the

⁶ GELLER E. SCOTT, Evaluating Energy Conservation Programs: Is Verbal Report Enough? *Journal of Consumer Research*, Volume 8, Issue 3, December 1981

dissemination of the values of sustainable development and the promotion of knowledge paths in the field of environmental protection issues; or the ‘ReSet The Trend’ campaign launched by the European Commission to raise awareness of the damage to the environment produced by fast fashion, low quality and low price fashion, and to induce them to change the trend towards sustainable and recyclable fashion.

The weak point, in this case, lies in the time factor: in fact, the positive effect of this ‘acculturation’ action produces benefits that are indeed long-lasting, but only after several years. A crucial point was the work carried out by E. Scott Geller in 1981, who demonstrated that information on the environmental impact of behavior is not on its own sufficient to bring about significant changes, refuting the common belief that environmental education would automatically lead to more sustainable behavior. This discovery paved the way for a deeper analysis of the motivations that drive human behavior in relation to sustainability.

d. Nudging: uses, types and criticisms

A further alternative involves designing actions that orient people's actions in favor of sustainability, i.e. initiatives whose objective is to channel choices towards a certain option, deemed preferable. This is the aforementioned nudge, based on the consideration that, contrary to popular belief, people's decision-making processes are almost never guided by perfectly rational principles. On the contrary, they are constantly suspended between conflicting cognitive processes: rationality and irrationality, complexity and simplification.

In order to achieve the result expected by the external decision-maker (who, in the field of sustainability, is mostly identified with institutions), the decision-making context must be prepared in accordance with the interest pursued, prodding the user towards the desired behavior, but always leaving him the possibility of *opting out*, i.e. of implementing a different behavior from the one that best serves the interest to be protected⁷.

“Some of the major areas of application have been in the areas of resource conservation, energy efficiency and waste management. A wide variety of nudges have been tested and

⁷ TOUTI, M. (2022). Applicazione della nudge theory per un consumo sostenibile. Uniroma1.

implemented, so that some academics (Anne Sophie Elberg Nielsen - Nudging and Pro-environmental Behaviour - 2016) have classified them into four *types*⁸:

1. Simplification and provision of information: in this case, nudging is based on the idea that it is not only the amount or accessibility of information provided to people that matters, but also the way in which this information is presented; providing complete, credible and simplified information greatly reduces the complexity of choice and enables it to be directed towards sustainable actions. A classic example of this type of nudge is that of eco-labelling, where labels and marks testify to the supposed sustainability of a product by inducing consumers to buy it. Think of the grid introduced by the European Union, starting in 2005, to classify the energy efficiency level of household appliances through the use of letters;
2. Default options: this type of nudge exploits the fact that people often choose passively by accepting the default options proposed to them. Theoretically, this is determined by factors including implicit suggestion, or endorsement, and inertia on the part of the decision maker. The most frequent application is found in the choice between different energy sources: establishing the most environmentally friendly one as the default choice has proven to be a very useful strategy to steer people towards greener consumption;
3. Changes in the physical environment: the underlying assumption of nudge is in this case that in low-involvement decision-making situations individuals allow the physical environment to influence their choices. Applications have mainly concerned the issue of waste separation (the physical and spatial arrangement of containers is decisive for the proper disposal of waste) and the reduction of food waste (by reducing the size of plates in canteens and hotels, people automatically fill their plates less, thus avoiding excess waste);
4. Use of social norms: this type of nudge activates the virtuous comparison with one's reference group (so-called peer comparison). Robert Cialdini, Raymond Reno and

⁸ MORATTI Angelo Moratti, Tecniche di nudging in ambito ambientale - Una rassegna di esperienze e risultati, Collana "Quaderni dell'Osservatorio" n. 34, Anno 2020, Fondazione Cariplo

Carl Kallgren⁹ have identified two ways in which social norms influence the individual: as injunctive norms and as descriptive norms. The former indicate what is considered morally correct by society, while the latter inform how all or most individuals behave. Here again, the most widespread use concerns energy consumption: periodically distributing a report to households that allows them to compare their current consumption with past consumption and that of neighborhood households produces a significant reduction in consumption.

Nudging is not, however, without *criticism*, especially when used in the public sphere. In particular:

- the application of a nudge presupposes the identification of desirable behaviour, which raises the question of the definition and measurement of what is desirable for the individual and/or society. In particular, when dealing with a public decision-maker, the problem of opportunistic choices, also taken unintentionally, e.g. due to lack of information, may arise;
- nudge represents a form of manipulation since, although it is inevitable that nudges act in every decision-making environment, there is a substantial difference between a context in which behavior is influenced accidentally and a context in which it is influenced intentionally¹⁰;
- the actual effectiveness of nudges has not been proven. Some studies, although still limited and therefore not generalizable, have shown that only 62% of nudges were found to be impactful¹¹, among them, in particular, the default option, while according to other studies the behavioral change promoted by nudging is quite

⁹ CIALDINI, R. B., KALLGREN, C. A., & RENO, R. R. (1991). A FOCUS THEORY OF NORMATIVE CONDUCT: A THEORETICAL REFINEMENT AND REEVALUATION OF THE ROLE OF NORMS IN HUMAN BEHAVIOR: p.201-234 (Vol. 24).

¹⁰ HANSEN, P. G., & JESPERSEN, A. M., Nudge and the manipulation of choice: A framework for the responsible use of the nudge approach to behaviour change in public policy. European Journal of Risk Regulation, 2013

¹¹ HUMMEL D., & MAEDCHE A., How effective is nudging? A quantitative review on the effect sizes and limits of empirical nudging studies. Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics, (2019)

similar to that of other traditional approaches such as educational campaigns or incentives¹²;

- nudges are perceived as interventions on the side, incapable of responding to the major challenges facing society today, since they cannot replace citizen information, educational initiatives and the traditional means of intervention of institutions, which are the law and the levers constituted by economic incentives.

In the context of the criticism of nudging, it is worth considering a lively debate that has developed by Nick Chater and George Loewenstein, who, in a very famous article¹³ of 2022, questioned the effectiveness of public policies aimed at affecting the behavior of individuals as opposed to those that act, instead, at the system level. Specifically, the two scholars introduce the concepts of ‘I-frame’ and ‘S-frame’: while the ‘I-frame’ (individual frame) focuses on changing behavior at the individual level by adopting strategies such as financial incentives, behavioral nudges and awareness-raising campaigns, the ‘S-frame’ (systemic frame) considers the broader context in which decisions are made and aims to influence behavior through structural policies, regulatory changes and institutional reforms. The contrast between the two concepts is made explicit in the following example: “[W]e doubt that the problem of reducing carbon emissions can be solved or even significantly remediated by i-level interventions such as providing small incentives, more information, more transparent information, more feedback, more awareness of social norms, or just greener ‘defaults.’ The policy interventions required to have a real impact on climate change will require system changes on a huge scale: changing how we heat our homes, produce and consume food, how we travel and ship goods, rethinking almost every aspect of manufacturing, along with vastly expanding the production and distribution of green electricity and (probably) hydrogen¹⁴”.

In response to the aforementioned article, about a year later (2023), Cass Sunstein, creator together with Richard Thaler of ‘Nudge Theory’, published the paper ‘Conspiracy Theory: On Some Misconceptions about the Uses of Behavioral Science in Government’,

¹² MERTENS, S., HERBERZ, M., HAHNEL, U. J., & BROSCHE, T., The effectiveness of nudging: A meta-analysis of choice architecture interventions across behavioral domains. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2022

¹³ CHATER, N. & LOEWENSTEIN, G. (in press). The i-frame and the s-frame: How focusing on individual-level solutions has led behavioral public policy astray. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.

¹⁴ *ibidem*

in which he disagreed with Chater and Loewenstein that I-frame initiatives displace S-frame approaches and argued that: *“it would be false to suggest that in the real world of policymaking, official uses of behavioral science have been focused on, and dominated by, attempts to alter individual behavior. It would be far more accurate to say exactly the opposite — that many of the major efforts have involved efforts to target systems and institutions, sometimes through mandates and bans, sometimes through subsidies and taxes, and sometimes through nudges¹⁵”*. Purposefully interviewed by the “Center for Health Incentives and Behavioral Economics (CHIBE)” Sunstein states that *“the paper did not seem at all aware of what governments are actually doing or of how governments work. [...] There are energy efficiency rules, and fuel economy rules, and there is the HFC phasedown, and there is much more [...] On obesity, a great deal has also been done; [...] Still, it is obviously costly to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and costs matter, especially in a challenging economic time. Higher energy costs are not exactly welcome. It is also costly to shift people’s eating habits, and those costs matter too. People like high-calorie foods¹⁶”*.

In reaction to this analysis, a further theoretical development is proposed: the ‘C-frame’ or ‘community frame’. In this new theoretical framework, it is proposed *“an alternative frame, the community-focused (c-frame), which provides a bridge linking the i- and s-frames, while also highlighting the interdependence between the two¹⁷”*. In other words, the ‘community frame’ values the dynamics within communities and their ability to influence and be influenced by public policies. It recognizes that the most effective solutions are those rooted in the specific social fabric of each community, which enhance local resources, traditions and pre-existing relationships.

For example, in climate change policies, the C-frame emphasizes the importance of developing local initiatives that harness communities' sense of ownership and shared responsibility. This approach can manifest itself in community-managed recycling

¹⁵ SUNSTEIN, Cass R., Conspiracy Theory: On Certain Misconceptions About the Uses of Behavioral Science in Government (January 8, 2023). Harvard Public Law Working Paper No. 23-27

¹⁶ Ross, M. (2023, September 29). I-frame, S-frame, and the Use of Behavioral Economics in Government: A Q&A with Cass Sunstein. Center for Health Incentives and Behavioral Economics (CHIBE).

¹⁷ CAGGIANO, H., CONSTANTINO, S., LEES, J., MAJUMDAR, R., & WEBER, E. (2023). Community-engaged research is best positioned to catalyze systemic change. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 46, E152.

programs, energy-saving initiatives or urban agriculture projects that stimulate active citizen participation.

By implementing the c-frame, policy makers can formulate policies that not only aim to change individual behavior or entire systems, but also to empower communities to become active agents of change. This method promises more sustainable and deeply rooted solutions as it directly involves communities in the creation and implementation of policies that affect them most. The c-frame highlights the critical role of publics and activists in shaping public policy and demonstrates how behavioral sciences can help promote systemic change through bottom-up collective action.

On the basis of the previous considerations, it is clear that nudges are not to be perceived as an alternative to the instruments used by the institutions in the field of sustainability. As clearly expressed in the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on “Integration of nudges into European policies” (2017/C 075/05), nudges are “a public policy tool complementary to those already used by European public authorities (information and awareness-raising, financial incentives, legislation and example)”. Due to their agility and simplicity, ‘they could be integrated into the framework of comprehensive public policies and accelerate their implementation at a lower cost’.

This was also highlighted in the study conducted by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Environment and Economy Group (MEG), in collaboration with COWI A/S, which analyzed the use of nudging in areas such as energy consumption, waste management and resource efficiency. This study showed how an integrated approach between behavioral science and public policy can foster systemic and lasting change.

Chapter 4 - Business and sustainability

Business and socio-environmental responsibility

The binomial business-sustainability recalls, first of all, the undisputed responsibility of the production system with respect to the emergence of threats that for centuries have endangered both the survival of the Planet from the environmental point of view and, within it, the fair and balanced coexistence of the different populations that inhabit it. On the one hand, the production processes in which the economic activities of companies (whether agricultural or industrial) are carried out contaminate the environment around them, creating negative consequences for the ecosystem; on the other hand, companies, particularly multinationals, pursue competitiveness by relocating to emerging countries that have an 'inexhaustible army of employees willing to enter the labor market with very low wages and social standards', thereby also conditioning the 'wage levels and conditions of labor exploitation' of western economies¹⁸. Consequently, the need to adopt initiatives to benefit the sustainability of the development model has long been addressed by institutions to the business world, which has, therefore, become the main recipient of actions and prescriptions to be followed on both a voluntary and mandatory basis.

Business and Institutions

The first body to issue a collection of principles and standards on 'responsible business conduct' was the OECD²² (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development)¹⁹, which in 1976 issued the 'Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises', subject to revisions and additions in the following years, outlining the principles that must inspire company management, starting with publicity and transparency of company behaviour and the impact on society and the environment, and ending with workers' rights and social rights, and going on to environmental and consumer protection.

Another important milestone is the 'EU Green Paper, Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility' of 2001²⁰, outlining the internal (human resource

¹⁸ PERULLI A. (2009). Il lavoro nella dimensione sociale del mercato globale. Atlante dei Diritti Umani. Utet.

¹⁹ Della Cooperazione Internazionale, M. D. a. E. E. (n.d.). The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) – Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale.

²⁰ COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES. (2001). GREEN PAPER Promoting a European framework for Corporate Social Responsibility. In European Parliament.

management, occupational health and safety, management of corporate restructuring, management of natural resources and environmental impacts) and external (impacts on the local community, consumers, suppliers and business partners) dimensions of corporate social responsibility and referring to the unstructured and unregulated practice of companies to report on the sustainability of their management in a variety of ways.

We have to wait until 2014 to introduce a real obligation with regard to sustainability reporting: the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (Directive 2014/95/EU) stipulates, in fact, that for public interest companies with more than 500 employees, the management report must include a non-financial statement, covering four thematic areas: environmental impacts, aspects related to social issues, respect for human rights, considerations and evidence related to corruption risks and good corporate governance.

It is with the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (Directive 2022/2464/EU) approved in November 2022, that sustainability officially becomes a key component of the overall assessment of corporate performance. In fact, the Directive broadens the scope of application to include a larger number of companies (all large companies, as well as listed companies and non-EU companies that generate substantial turnover within the EU, with the number of companies at European level gradually increasing from 11,600 to 49,000) and a larger number of information requirements. In this way, the conditions are created for stakeholders (investors, customers and civil society) to have at their disposal “more detailed, clear and as standardized and exhaustive information on sustainability for each individual company or group, with obvious positive consequences for the financial market in terms of completeness of information, transparency and comparability of data²¹”.

The sustainability focus of institutions for the business world is not only expressed through the introduction of obligations. The other important tool used to steer companies towards increasingly sustainable management is the introduction of economic incentives for new investments, employee recruitment policies, corporate governance, etc. By way of non-exhaustive example, the following facilitation measures are mentioned:

²¹ Ministry of Economy and Finance - Department of the Treasury - Public Consultation on the outline of the transposition of Directive (EU) 2022/2464

- “Sustainable Investments 4.0”: a ‘non-refundable contribution’ for the realization of investments (plant and equipment, hardware&software, etc.) that foster the technological and digital transformation of enterprises;
- “Italy social economy”: financial benefits to companies carrying out socially useful activities (e.g. employment of disadvantaged people; social inclusion of vulnerable people) in the general interest (protection of the environment; enhancement of historical or cultural assets).

Business and Citizens

Analyzing the corporate actor in the field of sustainability, the other important relationship to investigate is that with citizens. It is, in fact, necessary to highlight that companies increasingly choose to undertake a path of social responsibility on the basis of the awareness that environmental and social initiatives influence the decisions of consumers, who are increasingly critical, sensitive and selective. The willingness of companies to differentiate themselves places the economic-productive model within a framework of socially shared values, inspired by (and permeated by) an ethical framework based on respect for human and workers' rights, environmental protection, and the fight against corruption²².

Research on this topic shows that, before making a purchase, more than nine out of ten individuals say they inquire about the sustainability of the product or service of interest. It is mainly the environmental sphere that citizens are interested in, paying attention to the materials used, which must be renewable, natural and recyclable, and to the impact of the production cycle; the durability of the good ... does not seem to be a priority aspect at the moment, especially for Baby Boomers, still influenced by the ‘consumer culture’; finally, the social aspects of sustainability are not yet considered as primary drivers affecting the purchase²³.

²² KOKOT M., La crisi? Una cura di disintossicazione davvero salutare, da “Il Sole24Ore – Rapporti sulla Responsabilità Sociale” del 26 maggio 2009

²³ POGGI Andrea, AMELIO Franco, Il cittadino consapevole, Osservatorio Deloitte sul trend di sostenibilità e d’innovazione, 2022

What are the channels and tools that enable consumers to find information on the sustainability of the product or service they intend to buy?

First and foremost, labels are an important source of information, allowing companies to communicate their commitment to reducing environmental impact throughout the entire production chain. Partly due to the increased use of national or international certification, around 25% of products have a sustainability claim on the label. However, the absence of a single standard for measuring environmental performance makes it complex for consumers to find their way around. In addition to labels, traditional channels such as print media and TV are still important for many consumers, followed by official company channels, digital channels (influencers and social media) particularly popular among Generation Z and word of mouth among friends and acquaintances.

In relation to the availability of available information, one of the major concerns for citizens is greenwashing. This term refers to all those situations in which a company implements a communication strategy aimed at conveying a virtuous image in terms of ecological impact, even if what is reported is then not fully or partially matched by actions of equal value in terms of sustainability. Citizens prove to be particularly attentive and sensitive to this phenomenon: 65% believe that such practices are often used by companies and only 44% say they trust what companies communicate. Citizens' perceptions are also reflected in studies carried out by the European institutions; after examining various websites to check the sustainability claims of products and services, the European Commission found that more than half of the “green claims” had “symptoms” of illegality. Of these, 37% used generic and ambiguous language (e.g. ‘conscious’, ‘eco-friendly’, ‘sustainable’), while 59% did not provide any concrete data or information to support their claims²⁴.

It is also the marketing and sales techniques adopted by companies that impact on the business-to-consumer relationship. The tool of nudging, also used in this context, although effective in directing consumer behavior, can easily deviate towards purely commercial ends if not properly controlled. For example, the practice of suggesting

²⁴ POGGI Andrea, AMELIO Franco, Il cittadino consapevole, Osservatorio Deloitte sul trend di sostenibilità e d'innovazione, 2022

urgency of purchase, as in the case of the ‘last three items available’, can induce impulsive purchases that do not reflect the real needs or preferences of consumers, but rather exploit their psychology for sales advantage.

Directives and regulations introduced by institutions establish a stricter framework that companies must follow, not only in terms of environmental and social impacts, but also with regard to the transparency and honesty of information provided to consumers. This promotes corporate behavior that respects not only environmental and social standards but also the integrity of marketing strategies.

At the same time, citizens, armed with increased awareness and sensitivity to sustainability issues, exert constant pressure on companies to adopt more responsible practices. This increasingly informed and critical public can therefore act as an effective counterbalance against the manipulative use of nudging, thus fostering marketing strategies that not only comply with regulations but are also in line with the values of sustainability and social responsibility.

In conclusion, the interplay between stringent regulations and a demanding public creates an environment in which corporate communication policies must be used in a way that truly supports sustainability and consumer welfare rather than manipulating them for corporate profit.

Conclusion

Synthesis

Starting with an analysis of the time and manner in which the modern concept of sustainability was arrived at and shared globally, the paper examined the various actors (citizens, institutions and businesses) that fuel the sustainable transition, delving into the contribution of each, as well as the mutual conditioning that blurs the distinction between active and passive agents of change.

In the course of the discussion, it became clear that:

- the citizen can be considered both the fuse that triggered the current process and the drive that periodically draws the attention of governments to the urgency of taking concrete action on sustainability, and the one who, as a consumer, conditions the production, distribution and communication policies of companies, which are increasingly attentive to orienting their strategies towards sustainability in order to intercept citizens who are gradually becoming more aware. At the same time, he is the main recipient of the various initiatives taken by institutions (awareness campaigns, bans and obligations, incentives and nudges), but also by companies (marketing);
- institutions, in the face of growing awareness on the part of civil society, have emerged as the actors who, in accordance with their role, but also with the consensus of citizens, establish the objectives to be pursued and produce various policies aimed at promoting sustainable behavior by both the other two categories of actors;
- companies take on a passive role vis-à-vis both institutions, as recipients of the prohibitions, obligations and incentives introduced by them to limit the environmental and social impact of production processes, and citizens in their capacity as consumers, but with respect to the latter they also act as active players capable of conditioning their purchasing choices through practices that are not always correct.

Best practice – Quid Project

The above conclusions show that it is only through the involvement of all the actors of change that the virtuous circle capable of triggering environmental, social and economic change can be triggered.

In this regard, I have the pleasure of concluding this paper by recalling the example offered by an initiative (Quid Project) that today has yet to be counted among the best practices, but that hopefully in the near future will represent a normal development model that guarantees environmental, social and economic sustainability with the involvement of all the actors of change.

Quid Project²⁵ was founded in 2013 as a Made in Italy ethical fashion brand that designs, produces and distributes collections inspired by the circular economy and social inclusion. The slogan used is significant: “New life for people and fabrics”.

The garments and accessories are mainly made using surplus and end-of-series fabrics, made available, in-kind or for a symbolic price, by a network of weavers and brand partners; this makes it possible to preserve the economic and environmental value of resources that would otherwise have to be disposed of, while avoiding the production of new raw materials. In 2022²⁶ the company used a total of 285,558 metres of material between textiles and leather; of this, only 7 per cent was produced at Quid's request, the remainder was donated by more than 55 weavers, printers, brands and fashion houses, partners of the company.

Another important feature of the company is that it employs workers at risk of marginalisation and employment discrimination, with a focus on women. There were 144 active employees at the end of 2022 aged between 19 and 67. Of the total number of employees, 42 were disadvantaged and 47 were vulnerable or had a history of labour

²⁵ EMANUELE. (2024, May 13). Homepage - Progetto QUID. Progetto QUID. <https://www.progettoquid.com/>

²⁶ *ibidem*

vulnerability. There were 118 female employees at the end of 2022, more than 80% of the workforce, and 56 foreign employees, more than one third of the workforce²⁷.

Progetto Quid distributes its products through its own stores and the online channel, so as to directly reach its customers, whom it considers ‘prime agents of sustainable change’; at the same time, it pursues the goal of contaminating the fashion world, creating social and environmental impact partnerships with sustainability-conscious brands (62 partners in 2022)²⁸.

This initiative, which places the citizen, consumer and worker at the centre of its objectives, while guaranteeing the environmental sustainability (material recovery) of its activity, as well as its economic sustainability (EUR 6.5 million turnover 2022)²⁹, is also able to realise its objectives thanks to the support of public institutions, which have contributed to supporting the project through the granting of financial facilities to support investments, training activities and job placements, and private institutions (philanthropic partners), from which donations come.

²⁷ *ibidem*

²⁸ *ibidem*

²⁹ *ibidem*

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