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Exploring sustainability practices in the Albanian business environment

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This paper aim is to explore sustainability in business operations, with a particular emphasis on the Albanian context. This paper aimed to provide risk based insights into the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability, and to address how businesses can integrate sustainable practices into their operations. Key topics included circular economy activities, sustainability reporting (non-financial reports), risk management and the alignment of business practices with environmental standards. The paper is based on a mixed method approach, combining qualitative data gathered through group interviews, and quantitative data gathered through a questionnaire. The study emphasized the need for developing knowledge to support sustainable entrepreneurship through innovation and upskilling, with participants—ranging from environmental experts to entrepreneurs—sharing best practices and identifying areas for improvement. Economic benefits of sustainable development are analyzed and the social aspects of sustainability are also considered, with participants discussing current practices and potential improvements within the Albanian business environment. This paper addresses sustainability challenges and explores opportunities for Albanian businesses to embrace circular economy principles and improve sustainability reporting practices. Insights from the paper will inform the design of future risk management strategies within the business sector promoting sustainable entrepreneurship and fostering positive change in Albanian business operations.

Keywords: sustainable entrepreneurship, risk management, circular economy, Albania.

1. Introduction

The notion of sustainable development has been at the center of debates since it was first introduced in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987). Its dimensions and pillars include environmental aspects, economic aspects and social aspects. Among these, the most addressed in the international literature have been the economic and environmental ones, while social sustainability has been overlooked or not fully explained and demonstrated in practice (Ajmal et al 2017; Dempsey et al. 2011). The main emphasis has been given to the role of business sector in achieving the goals and leading the action towards sustainable development, with concepts such as sustainable entrepreneurship being thoroughly addressed especially in the past 20 years (Terán-Yépez et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2022; López et.al, 2021). Seeking and incorporating sustainable business models is becoming an integral part of the field of

business strategy and management, reshaping its theoretical and practical foundations and opening up new research areas (Hahn et.al 2018).

Despite its recognition in the international literature, the field has been insufficiently researched by Albanian scholars. This is due to many factors, particularly related to the lack of awareness on sustainable development in the country and its complex connections with the entrepreneurial world. However, since the last decade, with the rising need of exploring and explaining sustainability in all its dimensions, both theoretical concepts and practical implications, research focusing on the issue and exploring the challenges, barriers and opportunities have intensified. This article aims to contribute to this particular body of literature. This study aims to develop a better understanding of the barriers and opportunities of embracing sustainable practices in the Albanian business context, providing risk based insights into the environmental, economic, and social

dimensions of sustainability. This study will explore the level of understanding on the dimension of sustainability from corporate perspectives, in an effort to recognize core aspects that are essential for business organizations to integrate into their business operations. Key topics include circular economy activities, sustainability reporting (non-financial reports), risk management and the alignment of business practices with environmental standards.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section will give an overview of literature in the field of sustainable entrepreneurship, exploring the main findings of international and Albanian authors. Next, the methodology of the study will be presented and the main findings will be explained. Conclusions and recommendations are included in the last section of the paper.

2. Literature review

In the recent years, the implementation of sustainable business practices have gained significant attention from academics and policymakers due to their role in addressing environmental concerns (Shao et al., 2020; Du and Li, 2020; Wielgórk, 2016; Song et al., 2019; Carfora et al., 2021). In defining sustainable business practices, multiple terms, such as green entrepreneurship, ecological entrepreneurship, and environmental entrepreneurship, have emerged in the literature (Dean and McMullen, 2007; Hockerts and Wüstenhagen, 2010; Gast et al., 2017). Sustainable entrepreneurship concept in particular, which integrates economic, environmental, and social objectives in the entrepreneurship definition, has been thoroughly used by researchers (Dixon and Clifford, 2007; Sun et al., 2020; Terán-Yépez et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2022). The concept involves entrepreneurial practices that promote environmental sustainability, such as green product development, carbon labeling, clean energy adoption, and waste reduction (Alwakid, Aparicio, and Urbano, 2021; Chaudhry et al., 2020).

Despite growing interest in the adoption of sustainable business practices leading to the implementation of sustainable entrepreneurship,

several challenges and barriers hinder its adoption. Within organizations, personal drive, community engagement, and the managerial approach can either support or obstruct sustainability initiatives (Silajdžić et al., 2015; Bansal and Roth, 2000; Williams and Schaefer, 2013). On the other hand, external factors such as government policies, stakeholders attitude, awareness and understanding of the complex issues and relationships between sustainability and business operations and access to funding are critical obstacles for sustainable businesses (Hoogendoorn et al., 2019; Di Domenico et al., 2010; Nicholls, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009; Cherian and Jacob, 2012; Ahmad and Zhang, 2020; Bhandari et al., 2022; Polonsky, 2011; Tumpa, 2019; Maqbool and Amaechi, 2022; Park and Tucker, 2017; Pinkse and Groot, 2015).

These challenges are even more pronounced in developing countries, where limited infrastructure, weaker economic systems, and an underdeveloped entrepreneurial ecosystem further complicate sustainable entrepreneurship (Argade et al., 2021a). Albania for example faces critical environmental issues, including air pollution, waste management, and marine degradation, primarily caused by industry and transport sectors (European Commission, 2022b; UNDP, 2022). Due to its commitments to the Paris Agreement, Albania aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 45% by 2030 and achieve net-zero by 2050 (UNDP, 2022), and for this aim to be achieved the serious engagement of the business sector is critical. However, it is argued that the Albania's business sector lags in sustainable practices compared to regional peers (OECD, 2022). Key national strategies, like the NSDEI 2022-2030 and the Waste Management Plan, emphasize sustainability in many economic and social field, though the implementation remains weak. Barriers include limited financial resources, lack of technical expertise, and insufficient government support. The need for risk assessment, adaptation strategies, and stronger policy enforcement is critical for advancing sustainable entrepreneurship. Some growing awareness, especially among SMEs, has been observed and related results have been presented in some studies (Icka et al., 2021; Cela and Resmeliu, 2015; Pojani and Grabova, 2022).

However the academic literature in the field remains insufficient.

The reminder of this paper aims to dive into the Albanian business sector, by exploring challenges but also identifying emerging opportunities in the journey toward sustainability in selected Albanian companies. Their understanding and perception on the importance of sustainability pillars is further assessed through a pilot survey.

3. Methodology and Results

3.1. The aim of the research and study context

By employing a mixed methods approach this study aims to identify the level of awareness and understanding on sustainable business practices in a selected sample of business representatives in Albania. They are approached through two methods of data collection: a focus group and a pilot questionnaire.

Albania offers a unique study context for this research for several reasons. Albania was the last European country to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, after centuries of Ottoman rule and nearly five decades of communist dictatorship. These historical influences have deeply affected Albanian society, shaping the entrepreneurial environment. There is a strong fatalistic mindset, rooted in Ottoman-era beliefs in predestination (Acevedo, 2008). This mentality was further entrenched by nearly fifty years of communist rule, where the state dictated major life decisions (Imeraj and Gruda, 2013). This mindset has led many Albanians to feel they have little control over external events. As a result, both individual agency and risk-taking in entrepreneurship have been limited, with many hesitant to start new ventures due to uncertainty and lack of institutional trust. Similarly, Albanians have a deep attachment to homeownership, a legacy of their agrarian past and post-socialist privatization policies (Zhllima et al., 2022). While this provides stability, it also restricts financial flexibility, as families prioritize property investment over business development (Pojani and Baar, 2016).

Short-termism is another challenge, shaped by economic instability and political uncertainty since the fall of communism (Kume and Llaci, 2000). Individuals focus on immediate survival rather than long-term planning (Shaqiri, 2008). In the business sector, this leads to an emphasis on quick financial gains rather than sustainable growth (Krasniqi, 2014). At the same time, a historical distrust of authorities, stemming from Ottoman rule and communist oppression, has resulted in widespread non-compliance with regulations (Uberti, 2018). This extends to the entrepreneurial landscape, where businesses often struggle with bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and legal uncertainties, further discouraging innovation and formal economic activity (Swinko, 2017).

Understanding these historical and cultural influences is crucial for understanding the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the country.

3.2. Focus Group

The aim of the conduction of the focus group is to gain a deeper insight into the importance of sustainability, as well as reporting on this topic. The focus group belongs to the group of qualitative methods and as such is used to research the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behavior of people in relation to the subject of the research. This method was preceded by a pilot "Delphi study", aimed at identifying the main topics to address in the focus group.

The realization of the focus groups provided additional insight into the topic of sustainability and help to see more precisely the ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability, then, sustainability practices applied by individual companies in Albania, aspects of sustainability that must be improved in the shortest possible period in Albania, possibilities of applying IT as support for sustainable development, etc.

The data will be processed through a qualitative analysis that includes: a presentation of respondents' opinions regarding the topics covered during the focus group, creation of criteria for grouping responses and categorization of responses in relation to the criteria.

During the focus group, questions grouped into six segments were asked and discussed to identify the attitudes and the current situation related to sustainability practices among Albanian companies and organizations as well as the degree of sustainability reporting. The topics included in the focus group are as follows:

- 1. Environmental aspects of sustainability
 - Environmental aspects of sustainability that are present in the practice of selected companies and ways of respecting environmental standards in them.
 - The impact of climate change and changes in the environment on the business activities of the selected companies.
 - Key environmental problems in the business operations of companies in Albania.
- 2. Economic aspects of sustainability
 - The impact of sustainable practices on the economic aspects of the operations of the selected companies.
 - Economic benefits that can be expected from orientation towards sustainable development.
 - Proposal of key economic indicators for assessing progress in the sustainable development of companies.
- 3. Social aspects of sustainability.
 - Examples of good practice of socially responsible behavior of selected companies.
 - Key problems in the socially responsible behavior of companies in Albania.
- 4. Key aspects of sustainability that must be improved in Albania.
 - The least developed aspect of sustainability in Albania.
 - Key problems in the implementation of sustainable practices in Albania.
 - Possibilities of applying IT to support sustainability practices?
- 5. Circular economy activities
 - Circular economy activities implemented by selected companies.
 - Activities of surgical economy that can be applied in Albania.
- 6. Sustainability reporting
 - Sustainability reporting practice in selected companies.

- The practice of sustainability reporting in Albania.
- Potential and limitations for sustainability reporting.

3.3. Research sample

The focus group was conducted with experts in the field of sustainable development. Characteristics of respondents set as criteria for their selection included:

- Field of work: sustainable development management.
- Work experience: All respondents have many years of work experience in their fields of work.
- Profession: Respondents have different professions and formal education in different fields.
- Experience: Experts cover different areas of expertise and come from separate experiences in the field.
- Gender: Respondents in the focus group are members of both genders.

A total of 7 participants were identified and invited. They were professionals in the field of sustainability and sustainability reporting, of which five respondents were representatives from the private sector and two other respondents from an international development organization and the civil society (Table 1). The focus group was organized on April 3, 2024, in the premises of the Faculty of Economics in Tirana lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes and was moderated by the author of this paper. The entire focus group was recorded and appropriately stored for current and further processing, with the permission of the participants. From the focus group, the project team has an audio file as well as a transcription of the conversation.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Respondent 1:	
Work position:	Manager/entrepreneur
Work experience:	More than fifteen years of work experience in company management and entrepreneurship
Industry and sector:	One of the green business companies in the country which exports also abroad
Respondent 2:	
Work position:	Manager

Work experience:	More than twenty years of work experience in law and financial management
Industry and sector:	One of the largest groups in Albania which operates through different companies in different sectors (construction mainly)
Respondent 3:	
Work position:	Manager/director of law department
Work experience:	More than fifteen years of work experience in law
Industry and sector:	The largest cement company in the country
Respondent 4:	
Work position:	Specialist
Work experience:	More than 10 years of work experience in the financial sector
Industry and sector:	One of the largest banks in the financial sector in the country
Respondent 5:	
Work position:	Manager/director
Work experience:	More than fifteen years of work experience in the field
Industry and sector:	Non-governmental organization from the civil society sector concerned with nature conservation
Respondent 6:	
Work position:	Project Manager
Work experience:	More than ten years of work experience in the field
Industry and sector:	International non-profit (donor) organization for change and development, which operates in the country
Respondent 7:	
Work position:	Manager
Work experience:	More than 15 years of work experience in the field
Industry and sector:	One of the largest banks in the financial sector in the country

3.4. Focus Group results

A full focus group report was produced after the development of the focus group. The first group of questions focused on the environmental practices of Albanian companies and the impact of climate change on their operations. Respondents noted differences between manufacturing and service sectors, with some companies creating eco-friendly products and adopting sustainability practices, while others found it difficult to "go green." Many highlighted the importance of understanding both the financial and social impacts of sustainability.

Companies recognized as "polluters" face challenges in meeting environmental standards, with technological solutions needed to reduce pollution. The need for balance between environmental impact and investment was also discussed.

The second group addressed the economic impact of sustainability. All respondents agreed that sustainable practices provide faster returns for businesses, particularly through investments in solar energy. Sustainability also enhances company image and customer loyalty. Some companies have adopted alternative fuels and offer training to promote sustainability, while others emphasized the need for financial support and grants for green business ideas. The banking sector has increasingly focused on sustainability, with some banks incorporating green loans and environmental management systems.

The third group explored social responsibility, with respondents noting that communities often expect job opportunities when businesses invest. One company highlighted its preservation of local flora as a best practice. Clear communication with the public is essential, and companies must distinguish social responsibility from marketing.

The fourth group discussed improvements needed in Albania's sustainability landscape. Some tourism companies have adopted sustainable practices, but a lack of market value for sustainability remains a challenge. There is no evaluation system to reward sustainable businesses, leading to unfair competition. An awareness campaign for customers and a system to evaluate sustainability in businesses are necessary.

The fifth group focused on the circular economy, noting that few companies, mostly large enterprises, engage in circular practices. Small and medium-sized enterprises struggle to implement these practices. The group discussed basic steps and legal solutions to improve circular economy activities.

The sixth group addressed sustainability reporting. Some companies follow European reporting standards, but there is little local initiative. Digitalization is seen as key to improving sustainability reporting, but many

businesses lag in adopting technology, limiting their environmental impact.

In summary respondents highlighted varying degrees of environmental practice implementation, with some companies producing eco-friendly products while others face challenges in adopting sustainable alternatives, emphasizing the need for better regulations, technological standards, and balanced investment evaluations. Across economic, social, and circular economy aspects, participants noted the role of banks, grant programs, and community engagement in promoting sustainability, stressing the importance of raising consumer awareness, improving reporting, and accelerating digitalization to foster sustainable development in Albania.

3.5. Pilot Survey

To complement the results of the focus group a pilot survey was conducted. A total of 30 participants completed the survey in the pilot phase. The aim was to explore the level of perception of respondents of different pillars of sustainability. In particular the primary goal of this questionnaire is to assess the current landscape of sustainability within businesses, focusing on three key aspects: environmental, economic, and social. The responses are intended to highlight the perceived benefits and barriers to sustainable practices, identify key motivators for sustainability action, and explore innovative solutions like circular economy practices and IT integration. The inclusion of sustainability reporting aims to understand how businesses communicate their sustainability efforts and what improvements are needed.

The results of the pilot survey are presented next. The research aim to go to the next phase, where the questionnaire will be distributed to a large number of participants, in order to achieve the results needed for a full quantitative analysis. All questions used a 5 levels Likert scale (ranging from completely insignificant to very significant) evaluation about the significance various aspects of sustainability as perceived by respondents.

The first question asked about ecological aspects of sustainability. The results highlights the perceived importance of ecological sustainability aspects. **Pollution control, waste management,**

and biodiversity protection stand out as the most critical, with the majority rating them "Very significant". Energy management is also seen as important, though with slightly less consensus, while energy efficiency shows mixed perceptions.

The second question aimed evaluating the significance of economic aspects of sustainability. **Socially responsible business practices** and **economic growth** are deemed highly significant, with most respondents selecting the "Very significant" level. **Cooperation with stakeholders** also scores high, reflecting its recognized importance. Meanwhile, **transparency in reporting** is emphasized as relevant but with less agreement on its criticality compared to other factors.

The third question assesses the significance of social aspects of sustainability. **Work conditions and health at work** and **community engagement** are rated as "Very significant" by most respondents, reflecting their critical importance. **Social inclusion** also stands out, with high ratings for significance. **Employee training** shows a strong focus on "Significant" responses, while **increasing awareness of waste classification** garners mixed opinions, indicating varying levels of perceived importance.

The fourth question highlights key challenges in implementing sustainable practices. **Legislation, lack of resources, and low levels of public awareness** are the most significant barriers, with the majority rating them as "Very significant". **Investment in human resources** is also deemed important, with many respondents considering it "Significant" or "Very significant". **Transparency of business**, while still relevant, shows a more balanced distribution across significance levels, indicating it is less universally recognized as a major challenge.

The fifth question highlights the perceived benefits of implementing sustainable practices. **Social benefits, resource optimization, and cost reduction** are regarded as the most significant, with a majority rating them as "Very significant". **Cooperation with the community** and **infrastructure development** also show strong significance, though with slightly more varied responses.

Next the significance of various sustainable practices implemented is assessed. **Education** stands out as the most significant, with a majority rating it as "Very significant". **Promotion of sustainable investment and transparency, communication, and reporting to stakeholders** are also rated highly, reflecting their importance. **Energy efficiency and water management systems** show varied responses, with significant but less uniform recognition of their importance.

Another question examines the significance of drivers for sustainability activities. **Satisfied employees and financial motivation** stand out as the most significant drivers, with the majority of respondents rating them as "Very significant". **Strategies and waste management plans** are also highly valued, with notable significance attributed to their role in sustainability efforts. **Partnerships and networks** receive varied responses, indicating moderate importance but with less consensus compared to other drivers.

The next set of statements analyse IT support for enhancing information sharing, communication, and digital processes, with moderate emphasis on transparency and employee education. Respondents further value sustainability reporting for creating long-term value, enhancing competitiveness, building trust, and driving learning, while also offering financial benefits through better access to credit. The limitations associated with sustainability reporting include **Complexity and reporting burden and lack of standardization** as the most significant challenges, with many respondents rating them as "Very significant". **Lack of prescribed legal and other regulations** is also notable, emphasizing regulatory gaps as a barrier.

The results presented above are being enriched in the next phase of the project and data collection, where it is intended to distribute the questionnaire to a large sample of participants in order to fully exploit the quantitative analysis of the data.

4. Conclusions

This paper contributes to the body of literature in the sustainable entrepreneurship field in Albania. The analysis shows a rising trend of sustainability practices among Albanian businesses, with a clear link between the willingness to adopt environmental practices and the perceived need

for them. All businesses in the study acknowledge the necessity of sustainability for competing in both local and international markets. However, the main motivators for adopting sustainable practices vary by company size. Representatives of small, medium, and large enterprises reveal that sustainability drivers are multifaceted. Smaller businesses are more agile in adopting sustainability, while larger firms are influenced by international policies. Recognizing these differences is crucial for fostering effective sustainability strategies. The study also suggests policy recommendations to boost business participation in sustainable practices, supporting Albania's environmental and climate goals. It highlights the importance of education to equip future entrepreneurs with sustainability skills and calls for innovative financing to overcome financial barriers. However, challenges like infrastructure limitations, complex regulations, and low public awareness hinder the growth of green entrepreneurship. Despite these issues, embracing green entrepreneurship could positively impact Albania's sustainable development and promote environmental awareness.

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