



# IMPACT OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM ON THE SELF-RELIANCE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN POLAND

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## ABSTRACT

The article aims to determine the impact of sustainable development on the self-reliance of local self-government in Poland. A thorough analysis of the historiographic evolution and philosophical foundations of sustainability, together with a review of its legal sources, indicates that sustainable development – implemented through the concept of governance – conflicts with the foundational values of Latin civilization and exerts a negative influence on local self-government in Poland. The article argues that the development of the decentralisation of public authority, which is highly desirable from the perspective of democratisation, is being inhibited, and that the financial autonomy of local government is not being expanded.

**KEYWORDS** Sustainable development, philosophy, critical theory, democratization, autonomy, decentralization

## 1. Introduction

Critical views of the idea of sustainable development are formulated and published much less frequently than articles extolling its virtues, but this does not mean that the concept under discussion is flawless or that its deficiencies are not worth addressing. On the contrary, a critical assessment – unbiased by the demand for being positive about the sustainable development paradigm – is rather appropriate (Kosiek, 2015). Moreover, there is a definitive trend of scholarship portraying sustainable development as intellectually void and as being neither sustainable nor capable of delivering development (Luke, 2005). A deeper analysis of the literature on sustainable development reveals a multiplicity of potential interpretations, ranging from a lofty idea to an elitist ideology, or even a kind of myth impossible to implement (Kosiek, 2016). I argue that these should be supplemented with yet another interpretation, according

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to which sustainable development may be understood as a concept with a hidden agenda.

Sustainable development is often used as a byword for humankind's continuous evolution on planet Earth. However, it is generally accepted that sustainability comprises not only environmental components but also economic and societal ones (Krause et al., 2016). Believed to elaborate on ideas such as equity (Cheng & Ali, 2023), sustainability is deemed to be intrinsically associated with ethics. Nevertheless, sustainable development, whether understood as a principle or more broadly as an idea, raises several questions about its legal nature (Kielin-Maziarz, 2020) and has global as well as national, regional and local significance (Dubis, 2019). Thus, sustainable development occupies an important position both within national and supranational law, including EU law. In Poland, sustainable development is governed by EU legislation – namely treaties, secondary law, and soft law – and by its implementation into national law (Zientkarski, 2019).

## 2. The idea of sustainability: a brief historiography of conceptual development

The concept of sustainable development is widely used across numerous academic fields – particularly in the social sciences – as well as in the legal regulations that govern public authorities, administration, and various aspects of public life. It is also common in journalism. The term has gained almost universal status, even though there is still no clear, universally accepted doctrinal or legal definition of it. The concept itself, first coined in 1713 by the Saxonian alderman Hans Carl von Carlowitz (Ura, 2019), originated in forestry, where the term “sustainable” described forest management in which the number of trees logged equalled the number capable of regenerating (Dubis, 2019). Today, however, sustainability refers not only to principles and objectives relating to environmental protection and socio-economic development, but also to any public policy. One might argue that sustainability, as an “ideology”, attempts to regulate all areas of human life, being yet another manifestation of globalism and an instrument for remodelling the world order (Stelmach, 2023a; Blutstein, 2016).

It still has a strong environmental overtone, but it is also associated with seemingly positive concepts such as decarbonization, digitalization, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or the new social contract. In fact, it is presented as an instrument of an “ecological civilization”, firmly detached from tradition and faith, placing nature as the reference point even for moral norms (Poskrobko, 2013; Nota, 2023).

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the idea of sustainable development has been elevated to the position of a truism that requires no verification whatsoever (Poskrobko, 2013). It is no longer a specific scientific concept, but has rather become “a kind of reflection through which a wide range of research problems relating primarily to the environment, as well as economics, sociology and law, are perceived, analysed and solutions sought” (Drywa, 2024). As such, Pena (2010) noted that the paradigm of sustainability is believed to contribute to the development of 21st-century socialism, at least in the environmental, political, economic and cultural domains. This explains why sustainable development, especially in the form of sustainable finance, is increasingly proposed as a solution to the global financial crisis, the migration crisis, the pandemic, and the war in Ukraine (Jurkowska-Zeidler & Janovec, 2024), as well as being a remedy for environmental disasters.

From a philosophical perspective, many factors have shaped the formation of this ideology. However, Malthusianism and Darwinism, as well as eugenic thought, left a significant mark. The developments of the Progressive Era in the United States – state interventionism and the rise of philanthropy together with the associated ethic of corporate social responsibility – were equally important. The Chicago School and especially the Frankfurt School also played a major role (Jacob, 2016). Similarly, papal documents describing the modernist movement, born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which sought to modernize the world at any cost, including religion, should also be taken into account (Stelmach, 2023a).

After this brief introduction and problem statement, this article aims to determine the impact of sustainable development on the self-reliance of local self-government in Poland. The research question addresses whether the implementation of sustainable development increases or decreases the autonomy of local self-government units in Poland. Based on the conducted analysis, I conclude that the paradigm of sustainable development, implemented through the concept of governance, conflicts with the foundations of Latin (Western) civilization, and thus has a negative impact on local self-government in Poland.

### 3. Foreign models of sustainable development

Since the democratic transition of 1989, local self-governments have been considered essential institutions for the effective democratization of the Polish state (Radomski, 2016). However, their role has been significantly depreciated through the implementation of other instruments aimed at introducing sustainable development. They have become executors of administrative decisions rather than decision-makers themselves. The reason for this shift is primarily the phenomenon known as network governance (or simply

governance), which is a powerful tool for implementing sustainable development. Although network governance is principally a term associated with public management science, it is essentially identical to the notion of participatory democracy in political science. Both concepts imply that important decisions are made by entities other than democratically elected self-governing bodies, whether executive or legislative.

Adopting the concept of governance therefore implies the assumption that making effective public policies requires that “many actors outside of the central government, both private and public, work together” in a system of multi-level governance (Piattoni, 2014). In other words, the term ‘governance’ denotes the interaction of three centres of power – government, the business sector and NGOs – as equal partners (Guz, 2009). Thus, the traditional democratic model of decision-making is being replaced by a governance model in which decisions are made, *inter alia*, by international organizations (United Nations, European Union, World Health Organization, World Bank), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or – as in the case of participatory budgeting or citizens’ panels (Zawadzka-Pąk, 2019) – by informal groups of citizens. In the context of sustainable development, the United Nations plays a particularly crucial role.

As a result, the model of local governance takes the place of traditional local government and its established institutional frameworks and processes. The system becomes increasingly fragmented, involving a growing number of ad hoc bodies created for specific purposes, a greater reliance on appointed rather than elected authorities, and stronger central or state oversight of local government functions and finances (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998).

Within the governance framework, cooperation between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations has expanded significantly, to the point where it has become standard practice under what is known as the partnership principle. This approach assumes equality between governmental and non-governmental participants. Its underlying logic is to continually transfer more political influence on these partners, potentially at the expense of formally elected authorities. This raises the question of whether the partnership principle may contribute to dismantling the democratic system, as representative democracy becomes increasingly replaced by co-governance arrangements, participatory mechanisms, multi-stakeholder agreements, and transnational governance networks. Such developments carry the risk of shifting legitimate moral authority away from elected bodies and into the hands of unelected groups focused on narrow interests, which may lack democratic legitimacy and sometimes promote radical agendas (Peeters, 2009).

It is worth noting that this is not the first time in modern history that specific measures have been imposed on Poland from above. For example, when Poland

was going through an economic transition after 1989, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Leszek Balcerowicz was not independent or free from external influence either. The economic system was based on the so-called Washington Consensus, i.e. the guidelines of the U.S. government and the International Monetary Fund for countries undergoing economic transformation. This top-down model was criticized by Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, who explicitly referred to the “shock doctrine” applied in Poland and pointed out that such radical reforms not only failed to achieve optimal economic growth but also drove many people into poverty and structural unemployment without benefiting the economy. A negative assessment of this approach is also presented in the government document *Strategy for Responsible Development to 2020 with an Outlook to 2030* (Radę Ministrów, 2017), signed by the then Minister for Development and Finance, later Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki. The introduction states that deregulation, privatization, trade liberalization and free movement of capital – although widely upheld – did not consider the weaknesses of Polish institutions, the unreformed judicial system, low levels of savings and unbalanced ownership structure in key sectors. As a result, “a kind of Darwinism prevailed” and entire communities were marginalized while reforms were mistakenly accepted as necessary and inevitable (Radę Ministrów, 2017).

The concept of sustainable development was, however, foreign to the Polish framework, and the Strategy for Responsible Development had to incorporate it primarily to comply with EU law.

#### 4. Critical theory as philosophical ground for sustainable development

One of the ways to truly appreciate the objectives of a particular legal institution is to understand its philosophical foundations. As indicated above, the philosophical basis for sustainable development has left-side provenance, in particular the critical theory developed by the so-called Frankfurt School (Bookchin, 1980; Jacob, 2016), which is grounded in such general ideas as universal happiness, liberation of humankind, human self-determination, and the abolition of profit and exploitative economy (Kotakowski, 2009). Critical theory is not a theoretical philosophical approach; rather, it is a form of “practical philosophy”. Essentially, it is a theory of permanent negation of existing culture and fundamental values, according to which construction is not progressive, but instead a form of critical deconstruction (Rozwadowski, 2018; Zawadzka-Pąk, 2021). Critical theory is thus a manifestation of revised classical Marxism, which pursues the same goal of gaining power and building a communist system, but with new methods (Rozwadowski, 2018).

Jürgen Habermas, a German Marxist thinker and a leading figure of the second generation of the Frankfurt School (Karoń, 2019), explains that critical theory emerged within Horkheimer's intellectual circle in an effort to reconsider the reasons behind the political disappointment that followed the failure of revolution in the West, the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, and the triumph of fascism in Germany. Its purpose was to reassess mistaken Marxist predictions while still preserving the original Marxist intentions (Habermas, 2000).

According to L. Kołakowski, a philosopher and scholar of Marxism, critical theory represents an inconsistent effort to preserve Marxism while distancing it from its traditional association with the proletariat and rejecting class- or party-based standards of truth. At the same time, it does not attempt to resolve the difficulties created by removing these foundations. Kołakowski views it as a partial form of Marxism in which the missing half is not replaced by anything new. He argues that the Frankfurt School derived its strength from pure negation, while its ambiguity stemmed from an unwillingness to openly acknowledge this, and at times even implying the opposite. In his interpretation, the Frankfurt School was less a continuation of Marxist thought and more a sign of its decline and stagnation (Kołakowski, 2009).

Critical theory therefore came to serve as a philosophical foundation for the revolutionary movements of 1968 (Rozwadowski, 2018). According to Karoń (2019), the institutional transformation inspired by the New Left's interpretation of critical theory has been underway since the 1970s, influencing the mindset of successive generations while distancing them from the awareness that critical theory is rooted in Marxism and was originally formulated as an ideology aimed at human emancipation. This long march has affected all institutions – state, political, administrative, educational and legal, both national and international (Guz, 2009) – including universities, art, cinema, theatre and schools.

Since critical theory is a direct, although skilfully camouflaged, German branch of Marxism (Karoń, 2019), it is no wonder that its goal is the systematic, planned, and methodical destruction of Latin civilization, which has been shaped by Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Christian ethics (Zawadzka-Pąk, 2021). However, in recent years these traditional values have been increasingly challenged in the countries of Western Europe, whereas the majority of Central and Eastern European countries, Poland being included, continue to endorse them. This shift in values results in distancing politics from its anthropocentric paradigm, making room for a biocentric model in which emphasis is placed on an "Earth-centred paradigm" with legal, policy and educational implications (Harmony with Nature, 2019). It follows that specifically human interests cannot always prevail over non-anthropocentric concerns (Stelmach, 2023b).

Although the similarities between the basic principles of Marxism and sustainable development are rather clear, their direct connection has not been established as a scientific fact. Nevertheless, several studies address this topic, and one Polish work in particular presents a very forceful line of argumentation. From this point of view, sustainable development is understood as a framework rooted in Marxist ideas, aiming to construct a new form of civilization in which what is described as “religious energy” is ultimately redirected toward the creation of an egalitarian, open society – though, at least in its early stages, guided and controlled by a small oligarchic elite. (Stelmach, 2023a). According to Stelmach (2018), sustainable development differs from Marxist economics only in its method of implementation; in essence, it represents the same approach. He argues that for the philanthrocapitalists who orchestrated the removal of gold from the financial system in 1971 – thereby initiating the era of economic financialization – sustainable development has been a long-planned process of transformation designed to secure their control over global resources and populations through networks of partnerships and systems of supranational governance.

Stelmach is not alone in this line of argumentation. Foster (2015) similarly argues that, although Marxism and the ecological transition might initially appear to represent two distinct movements – with the former focused primarily on class relations and the latter on the relationship between humans and the environment – there has in fact been a historical interplay between them. Socialism has shaped ecological thinking and practice, while ecological perspectives have also influenced the development of socialist theory and action. Marx’s texts demonstrate a deep concern for issues of ecological limits and sustainability (Foster, 2000), and he continuously pointed to the inherent problem of production in agriculture within capitalism, a problem ultimately linked to the unsustainable way in which production was organized (Foster, 2000; Ramakrishnan, 2001). The “deep ecological roots of Marx’s thought” stem from his environmental perspective on the overarching question of social transformation (Foster, 2015).

The aim of sustainable development is thus to modify the situation in which human activity has become the dominant force influencing global environmental change (Rose & Cachelin, 2018). Nevertheless, what we are dealing with is, in fact, a revolution carried out by peaceful means – through legislation, media propaganda, and the influence of institutions controlled and transformed by left-wing revolutionaries. This plan required patience and time because it was based on the so-called long march through institutions. To conduct a worldwide revolution, it was necessary to bring about the destruction

of existing society. Old values, principles and norms of behaviour had to be annihilated, and new ones created in their place (Rozwadowski, 2018).

I believe it is clear, even from the above brief overview, that the direct, albeit implicit, aim of critical theory is the annihilation of the values of Latin Civilization. In practice, this means an onslaught on five interrelated value-principles, namely: personalism, the limited role of the state, the concern for the justice of law, the special role of the Catholic Church, and the monogamous family as the foundation of society (Marzęta, 2020). Out of the above catalogue, the first two principles – personalism and the limited role of the state – are of particular importance for the self-reliance of local self-government.

Personalism means that “the human being is not dominated by a family or a state, but has full autonomy. He constitutes a value in his own right. He is a subject and not an object in social and political relations. This involves a whole range of values and principles respected and realized in the circle of Latin civilization: the dignity of the human person, human freedom, the primacy of Catholic ethics, or the principle related to freedom (and responsibility): *volenti non fit iniuria*” (Marzęta, 2020). From the above, in the context of local self-government, it follows that even the public authorities representing the local community – i.e. the decision-making bodies (councils) and the executive bodies (mayors of municipalities and presidents of collegiate executive bodies) – should enjoy such autonomy.

This claim is justified in particular in the context of the second value, namely the limited role of the state. Marzęta (2020) explains that limiting the role of the state results in a vibrant, bottom-up social sphere in which local communities and self-governments play a major role. The core of social life becomes self-organization rather than the implementation of solutions imposed from above by state institutions. In this view, the state is built upon society, rather than society being subordinated to the state. Although, in the formative period of Latin culture, international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union did not exist, it nevertheless seems logical to assume that the very foundations of Latin civilization should possess a certain degree of immunity from their influence today as well. Historically, other institutions, such as the Catholic Church or even the Roman Empire, may have exerted comparable effects.

Notwithstanding, the paradigm of sustainable development, implemented through the governance concept, should be treated with caution.

## 5. Sustainable development as part of a new global ethic

The implementation of sustainable development, if it is to be effective, must essentially be based on a change in people's values, beliefs, and behaviour (Stelmach, 2023a), resulting from a rejection of the traditional values of Latin civilization. As a consequence, we observe such phenomena as deteologization, depersonalization, despiritualization, deformalization, and pansecularization (Guz, 2010). Hence, the idea of sustainable development is one of the key concepts of the so-called 'new global ethic' that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War. Peeters (2009) argues that what is presented as a benign compromise in fact masks an anti-Christian agenda, rooted in Western apostasy and advanced by influential minority groups that have shaped global governance since 1989. He maintains that this emerging global ethic has replaced the universal values that underpinned the international order established in 1945, which are now dismissed as outdated. Unlike traditional universalism, this new ethic is marked by radical tendencies and, according to Peeters, cannot be fully understood without considering the new theological framework that preceded the cultural revolution – one that pushed the transcendence of God beyond human concern, reducing humanity to a purely immanent dimension.

At the same time, it is important to note that it was the United Nations that became the catalyst for cultural change in the world in the first half of the 1990s. What Peeters refers to as "green communism" implies that many concepts introduced after 1990 – such as sustainable development, women's empowerment, good governance, peace education, and dialogue between civilizations – initially appeared to address genuine public expectations. However, he argues that these aspirations were gradually redirected in a concealed manner. In his view, ideas such as global ethics, solidarity, altruism, and humanitarianism are increasingly being employed as rhetorical covers for an agenda oriented toward the dismantling of human and social structures. (Peeters, 2009).

Thus, decentralization and localization are becoming increasingly significant in putting the new global ethic into practice, since the consensus formed by expert groups at the global level was originally designed with the intention of being implemented directly at the local level (Peeters, 2010).

## 6. Supranational and Polish national legal sources of sustainable development

Sustainable development has both supranational and national legal sources. The principle of sustainable development originally took shape under the auspices of the United Nations, and the report of the World Commission on

Environment and Development entitled *Our Common Future*, signed on March 20, 1987 – also known as the *Brundtland Report* – was particularly relevant in this regard. It should be emphasized that although the Brundtland Report appears in many scientific publications on sustainable development, it does not constitute binding international law. Instead, it is a document important insofar as the concept of sustainable development was forged therein. The report asserts that humanity is capable of shaping development in a sustainable way so that the needs of the present can be met without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It emphasizes that sustainable development involves recognizing certain limits – not fixed or absolute boundaries, but constraints determined by current technology, social organization, the availability of environmental resources, and the capacity of the biosphere to absorb the impacts of human activity ([World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987](#)).

According to a widely referenced definition, sustainability refers to shaping society – at the institutional, social, economic, political, environmental, technological and cultural levels – in a way that enables future generations to survive and to meet essential human needs for everyone. ([Fuchs, 2017](#)). This is because sustainability is such a broad concept that it may be applied to virtually anything ([Saha & Paterson, 2008](#); [Liao et al., 2008](#)). Subsequent United Nations documents began referring to sustainable development as a principle, and the phrase “principle of sustainable development” first appeared at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. This milestone was crucial for formulating and promoting the concept of sustainable development ([Zientkarski, 2019](#)). On its 20th anniversary, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was convened in Rio de Janeiro – also known as the “Earth Summit”. This global conference drafted the so-called Agenda 21, urging the achievement of sustainable development in the 21st century. Twenty years later, in 2002, the *Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development* was adopted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). Finally, the most significant current UN document on sustainable development was adopted by all UN Member States in 2015: the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals with 169 associated targets ([United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.](#)).

Critics have pointed out that such meetings serve to construct utopian visions of a sustainable world in which equitable distribution and consumption of resources will be realized and green energy will operate, but which remain only on paper ([Kosiek, 2015](#)). Meanwhile, real commitments that could improve living conditions for the poorest – such as the proposal to establish a food fund

consisting of 0.7% of GDP of UN Member States – were overlooked. The same fate befell demands to place dangerous genetic engineering and nuclear research under international monitoring (Kosiek, 2015; Morzoł, 2015).

With respect to EU primary law, sustainable development is enshrined only with reference to environmental protection. Article 11 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that *“environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of the Union’s policies and activities, in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development.”* However, it should not be forgotten that the European Union also issues policy documents developing the concept of sustainable development in the form of consecutive strategies (Olejarczyk, 2016; Domański, 2019).

In terms of the Polish Constitution, the idea of sustainable development is invoked by Article 5: *“The Republic of Poland shall safeguard the independence and inviolability of its territory, ensure the freedoms and rights of man and citizen and the security of citizens, protect the national heritage and ensure the protection of the environment, guided by the principle of sustainable development.”*

Unfortunately, the wording of the provision is not entirely clear. There is no consensus in Polish legal scholarship as to whether the obligation to be guided by the principle of sustainable development should relate only to environmental protection, or to all state functions listed in this provision. However, the prevailing view holds that all actions carried out by the state, including those of local governments, must comply with this principle. Consequently, the state is also responsible for ensuring that local self-government upholds and implements it (Zientkarski, 2019). According to Tuleja (2023), the principle of sustainable development expressed in the constitution primarily indicates that environmental interference should be kept to a minimum and justified only when the resulting social benefits exceed the harm caused. This principle extends beyond environmental concerns and includes areas such as infrastructure development, the strengthening of social bonds, and the creation of coherent spatial planning. Furthermore, the principle of sustainable development is considered a programmatic guideline. Although it does not specify methods or instruments for its implementation, it nonetheless places an obligation on all public authorities to work toward its realization.

In Polish law, the principle of sustainable development is defined by Article 3(50) of the Environmental Protection Law, according to which it is understood as a social and economic development in which a process of integrating political, economic, and social activities takes place, maintaining natural balance and sustainability of basic natural processes in order to guarantee the possibility of satisfying the basic needs of particular communities or citizens of both the present and future generations. Comparing this definition to the report *Our*

*Common Future*, one must conclude that non-binding standards developed in the international arena permeate national law (Bentkowski, 2019). Regarding the Environmental Protection Act, it should additionally be noted that Article 9 requires that policies, strategies, plans, and programs relating in particular to industry, energy, transport, telecommunications, water management, waste management, land use, forestry, agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and spatial management take into account the principles of environmental protection and sustainable development.

## 7. Decentralization and financial autonomy (self-reliance)

In Poland, since the political transformation which began in 1989, local self-government has been perceived as an important institution enabling the effective democratization of the state (Radomski, 2016). The legislation was intended to abandon the idea of a centralized state and promote local self-government, and thus the decentralization of public authority (Article 15(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland) (Lotko & Zawadzka-Pąk, in review).

However, decentralization can be interpreted in both dynamic and static senses. From a dynamic perspective, it refers to the legal process of transferring certain responsibilities of public authority and the competences of governmental bodies to self-government units and their respective institutions, ideally at the lowest feasible level. In this way, the principle of subsidiarity is carried out, requiring among other things that decisions concerning public affairs be made at the most localized level of public administration possible (Miemiec, 2023; Kornberger-Sokołowska, 2010). In contrast, when understood in a static sense, decentralization refers to a legally structured form of public administration defined by systemic administrative law. In this arrangement, administrative entities are assigned clearly specified tasks under the law, and their governing bodies hold the authority to perform these tasks independently, in their own name and under their own responsibility. This framework is complemented by limiting the supervisory role of higher authorities – whether organizational or functional – to oversight based solely on the criterion of legality (Miemiec, 2023).

The foundations of decentralization are described at the constitutional level. According to Article 15(1), *“The territorial system of the Republic of Poland ensures the decentralization of public authority.”* Moreover, *“the territorial self-government participates in the exercise of public authority. The substantial part of public tasks vested in it under the laws shall be performed by the self-government in its own name and on its own responsibility”* (Article 16(2) of the Constitution). In addition, the entire Chapter 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland regulates the systemic issues of local self-government.

Within the framework of decentralization, a special role is played by financial decentralization, which is characterized by the legally defined financial self-reliance of the decentralized entity. The financial independence of a local authority – understood as part of the broader framework of its autonomy – functions as a separate institution as well as a principle within the public finance system. In the context of discussions on sustainable development, [Miemiec \(2023\)](#) notes that the everyday understanding of independence is helpful here, referring to a state in which an entity is not subject to external influence or authority and is able to operate without external assistance.

The financial autonomy of local authorities is of research interest to both economic and legal sciences, with economists more often using the term “autonomy” and lawyers the term “self-reliance”. In economics, this autonomy is mainly associated with management and equated with economic autonomy. The starting point for determining its extent is the value of the assets – municipal property – which, together with its own revenues and revenues received from the state budget, should ensure that public expenditures can be financed. From the legal point of view, self-reliance is a separate principle of the finances of local self-government units, determining their activity in their own name and on their own responsibility in collecting revenues (including legally defined tax authority), adopting and implementing the budget, and making expenditures within the framework of the budget economy ([Miemiec, 2023](#)). Of relevance to financial independence within the framework of sustainable development is the degree of freedom local governments possess in allocating funds and organizing their budgets, including both budget planning and execution ([Kornberger-Sokołowska, 2010](#)).

## 8. Conclusion

After having investigated the historical development and philosophical foundations of sustainability together with its legal bases, I concluded that sustainable development, implemented through the concept of governance, conflicts with the foundations of Latin civilization and has a negative impact on local self-government in Poland. As such, the following conclusions can readily be established:

- a. The municipal government is considered a key factor in the local implementation of sustainable development ([Budziarek, 2024](#)).
- b. The objectives of sustainable development go well beyond environmental protection to eventually encompass every area of public policy.
- c. The immediate goal of critical theory, which is the philosophical basis of sustainable development, is the negation of the values of Latin civilization,

which postulates the existence of a strong local government with a high degree of financial self-reliance.

- d. The ethics of Latin civilization, having God and a strong concern for human life at the centre, is progressively being replaced by environmental ethics, where natural phenomena and sustainable development play a key role—alongside reducing resource utilization, fighting global warming, environmental justice, secularization, or even reduction in natal growth (depopulation) – aiming at the creation of *homo ecologicus* (Stelmach, 2023a; Guz, 2010). This axiological shift attempts to restrict the freedom of human beings in such practical areas as meat consumption, airplane travel, or traditional energy sources.
- e. The transition from Latin civilization values toward ecological civilization is not revolutionary but rather evolutionary (via the long march through institutions). Hence, certain values remain common to both axiological orders, such as environmental protection or the eradication of poverty.
- f. The norms of the new global ethic, including sustainable development, are formulated at the global level, while only their implementation is decentralized toward the central (state) level and especially toward local government units. This aligns with the well-known idea associated with sustainable development, which encourages a global perspective while emphasizing action at the local level. (Jacob, 2016).
- g. The constraining effect of sustainable development on the autonomy of local governments in Poland arises from the obligation of local governmental units to adhere not only to national legislation but also to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – even though this agenda was formulated by an organization that interprets international law through the lens of consensus, which in turn contributes to obscuring the distinction between binding international law and mere agreement. (Peeters, 2010).
- h. Sustainable development is implemented through network governance, which implies that decision-making actors, in addition to legitimately elected bodies with democratic legitimacy, are given the status of informal legislators, resulting in a remodelling of the exercise of power.
- i. The way sustainable development is implemented does not serve to deepen the process of decentralization of power in Poland, because local governments are obliged to implement within their financial policy ideas conceived by partners (called experts) who have no democratic legitimation.

- j. Limitations on financial self-reliance through sustainable development mainly concern the spending aspect, as sustainable development guidelines govern especially the allocation of public funds, not sources of revenues. Sustainable development funding guidelines are implemented both through central statutory regulations (e.g., waste segregation) and non-binding “good practices” (e.g., collection of plastic bottle caps).

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