

NATIONAL REPORT for TREE project - Bulgaria

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I. Introduction

This report aims at providing an overview of the results of research conducted on the key themes related to project Tree. The objective of this document is to provide the national context in Bulgaria, one of the partner countries, in terms of ESD, sustainability and circular economy, VET schools and the three sectors selected as focal points of the project. It is to support the evaluation of needs and gaps within the country's context and thus support a more adequate, applicable and useful intellectual outputs at the end of the project.

II. What is Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): definition, applicability and use in Bulgaria

The United Nations promotes ESD as a global educational goal. The organisation's definition is perhaps the one that has been used and integrated the most. It states that *"Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers people to change the way they think and work towards a sustainable future."* The UN further embedded ESD into Goal 4 of its Sustainable Development Goals. These are goals the UN aims to achieve by 2020. Goal 4 (Part 7) includes this text: *"By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles..."*. In fact, the UN has designated 2005-2014 as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, with the position that "education, as a fundamental human right, is a necessary condition for achieving sustainable development and is a key tool for good governance, decision-making skills based on.

UNESCO has adopted ESD as the response for education to "the urgent and dramatic challenges the planet faces. To contain global warming before it reaches catastrophic levels means addressing environmental, social and economic issues in a holistic way. (UNESCO, ESD)

The European Parliament resolution of 11 February 2021 on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience ([2020/2818\(RSP\)](#)), adopted the following statements, amongst others:

- green and digital transitions, together with demographic trends and globalisation, are changing the nature of work, the content of jobs and the skills and qualifications required for them;
- whereas formal education and training systems are finding it increasingly difficult to respond to the full range of individual and social needs and demands in an ever changing world;

- Recalls that modernising vocational, education and training systems is key to preparing young people and adults for the green and digital transitions, and to ensuring that core age and older workers maintain and develop the skills required to safeguard employability and extend working life;
- Recalls that vocational skills are one of the driving forces of the European economy, and calls for a correlation between conventional education and VET, where the development of skills in VET, either as a central focus or a complementary part of the options available for both students and adults, can boost available opportunities for job-seekers, would foster job mobility and improve labour market resilience in crisis situations;
- Underlines the paramount importance of providing active support to teachers and trainers by adopting an effective policy package to ensure that they are well prepared and upskilled for the digital and green transformation of schools and education institutions

The acknowledgement of the need for green skills, training for teachers and a focus on VET training is clear, and as a member state, Bulgaria has initiated steps in this direction, thus starting to look into educational for sustainable development. In fact, a Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria until 2030 was adopted with Minutes No13 of a meeting of the Council of Ministers, held on 24.02.2021. The adopted strategic framework is in line with the development guidelines set out in the adopted strategic documents at European and national level, which form a vision for high-quality, inclusive, value-oriented and lifelong learning, training and learning. (ECVET) The Framework is aligned with the objectives of the policies of Priority 1 "Education and Skills" of the National Development Program Bulgaria 2030 in the part for pre-school and school education, vocational education and training and lifelong learning and has 9 priority areas identified. These are:

- early childhood development: competencies and talents;
- motivated and creative teachers;
- cohesive school communities and systematic work with parents;
- effective inclusion, sustainable inclusion and educational integration;
- educational innovation,
- digital transformation and sustainable development
- realisation in the professions of the present and the future;
- lifelong learning;
- efficient management and participation in networks.

The priority areas cover all significant horizontal challenges in the education and training system, following a holistic approach to the opportunities identified in the analysis. Significant place in the document is given to educational innovations, digital transformation and sustainable development, as well as the development of vocational education and training based on the transition to digital and green economy.

It is important to note, that it is a strategic goal for Bulgaria to become a country where SMEs invest in energy efficiency, develop and market "green" products.

Within the Operational Program "Environment" 2014-2020, opportunities are created for additional temporary and permanent employment in a number of fields, most of which require green skills. A report states that the "green economic development must be seen in the context of the overall development of the national economy, based on a drastic increase in energy efficiency and the transition to production based on knowledge and innovation". (Miteva, 2017) According to the Panel on Education for Sustainable Development, "education for sustainable development is the type of

education that teaches young people, communities, businesses and governments today and in the future how to lead a sustainable lifestyle, giving them an understanding of economic, social and environmental issues.". Hence, only through ESD, implemented in a structured, intentional and well developed manner, can Bulgaria truly fulfil the goals set out in this programme.

Currently, according to the Law on Public Education in force as of 31.08.2012 (Art. 15 and Art. 16), the State Educational Requirements (SER) determine the level of the necessary general education and vocational training, the curriculum, the content of textbooks and extracurricular and extracurricular activities. SERs are developed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science. Twice a year textbooks available are being reviewed and designated and the topics that are to be studied are determined by the State. When considering ESD, there are already themes integrated within high-school subjects. However, no clear curricula, set of lessons or a programme is currently available and approved on the State level for the target age group of the TREE project. This has not stopped VET institutions however and other organisations to work on courses and start integrating ESD in different forms in their work, largely underpinned by the market needs and the interest of the students.

Here we provide two examples of ESD and its applicability through the work of organisations

The Bulgarian National Committee for Preschool Education (BNC-OMEP) is a non-governmental organization - part of the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education. In 2019, it was published that it accepted BNC-OMEP accepts the 17 UN goals for global sustainable development of society and develops its national program for achieving and integrating the goals (OMEP, 2019), however it has been working in this direction, including through the organisation of forums and conferences since 2006. Some these were:

- 2010, Sofia: "Education for Sustainable Development: A Future for Children Today".
- 2014, Sofia: "Equality for the sustainability of the values of preschool education". Guests: Dr. Maggie Kong (Hong Kong), President of the OMEP World Organization and Dr. Nectarios Stelakis, President of OMEP for Europe.
- 2017, Sofia: "Preschool education with long-term goals and anticipatory practices - for today's and future generations."
- 2019, Sofia: National Round Table - "The Voice of the Child: Trust, Understanding, Support".

"The Golden walnut" is a network for education for sustainable development, implemented through the methods of non-formal education established in 2016. Seven non-profit organizations from all over Bulgaria participating in the Platform for Promotion and Quality of Education for Sustainable Development have been working for years in the field of non-formal education for sustainable development. They reportedly identified a need to standardize the quality of education for sustainable development and for the development of effective tools and promotion of ESD training activities.

III. Sustainability: Bulgaria's approach and priorities

a. Partner country's policies and Circular economy

As an EU member state, Bulgaria has an approach to sustainability aligned both with Sustainable Development Goals and the relevant EU policies. However, the country is reportedly falling behind in terms of reaching some of the goals set forth.

According to Mr. Vella in the Review of the Implementation of EU Environmental policies, the main challenges Bulgaria faces with regard to implementing EU environmental policy and law are:

- Ensuring better protection of human health by enforcing effective and efficient solutions to reduce air pollution.
- Providing and implementing the investments required to ensure the appropriate collection and treatment of urban waste water.
- Ensuring the sound enforcement of Nature protection legislation.

Where Bulgaria leads in environmental implementation, it could share its innovative approaches more widely among other countries. Concrete examples include:

- Bulgaria has adopted a well-structured and coherent Waste Management Plan, used as a model by other Member States.
- Bulgaria achieves nearly 100 % compliance rate as regards the quality of its drinking water, among others.

During the international forum "Green Transition - Solutions and Challenges for Bulgaria", organized by Dir.bg and 3eNews (Stefanov, 2021), the Deputy Minister of Economy Ivelina Peneva stated FLAG Fund is preparing a mechanism for new BGN 200 million for investment projects of the municipalities. According to her, this is underpinned "by the fact that Bulgaria is among the countries most affected by the transition to climate neutrality due to its dependence on fossil fuels and carbon-intensive processes. About 75% of Bulgarian exports are from industries in which energy-intensive industries predominate. According to BNB data for 2019, exports of raw materials represent 39% of total, consumer goods - 25% share, investment goods - 24%, energy resources - 12%. Reportedly, the Green Deal is going to affect the economy and local production more than other EU states. According to the European Action Plan, Bulgaria ranks 24th in the circular economy index and is lagging behind on several other indexes. A complete restructuring of the currently dominant linear economic model is needed, and the introduction of circular economy practices is an extremely necessary and important element in this process. (Tzvetanska, M.,2020). This calls for a fast, but sustainable change.

The National Strategy for Transition to Circular Economy (2020) defines it as a model aimed at extending the life cycle of products. In practice, this means sharing, borrowing, reusing, repairing and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible. When a product reaches the end of its life, the materials of which it is composed continue to be used in a different way. This minimizes waste generation. The Strategy was prepared in implementation of measure 589 "Preparation of a National Strategy in connection with the circular economy package of the Government Management Program of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2017 – 2021 and is aligned with the targets set forth by the European Commission. Furthermore, it is a part of a package of measures of the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria for the transition to a circular economy at the national level and has a implementation period of 2021-2027.

Bulgaria's approach to circular economy is long-term. The National Development Program: Bulgaria 2030 prioritizes the "circular and low-carbon economy". Currently, the eco-innovation index of Bulgaria is low compared to other EU states. This is why the Strategy puts a focus on Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It was estimated that in 2018, this segment contributed to 76% of total employment and 65% of value added in the Bulgarian economy. Hence, they will be one of the focal points for development. During the development of the strategy, some key aspects came into consideration, namely: the need for innovation and increase in production of organic products, issues with eco-labelling, the potential in the country for extraction and recycling of raw materials.

The Strategy has taken into consideration all of the aforementioned and has included targets for promotional campaigns, the inclusion of relevant topics in school curricula and raising consumer awareness. Within The National Strategy, there is a designated section titled Environment 2021-2027 Program, which has as one of its objectives the promotion of circular economy. These include, but are not limited to waste collection improvements, sustainable consumption recycling, and others.

In addition, the government has developed The National Strategy for SMEs, which sets out six priorities, one of which is the Environment. With regard to the circular economy measure, the aim of the SME Strategy is to better integrate SMEs into the circular economy, to improve recycling practices in the largest waste-generating SMEs; more efficient schemes for extended producer responsibility, covering more waste streams, wider use of secondary materials by Bulgarian SMEs, including through industrial symbiosis.

b. State of the Art in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, there are currently a couple of examples of “*state of the art*” projects and organisations related to circular economy, green skills and ESD.

- One of them is the Institute for Circular Economy (ICE), which is a Bulgarian NGO active at the intersection of circular economy, biomimicry and regenerative development. As an organisation, the ICE strive to provide brilliant consulting service, design excellence and innovation to create products and business models that enrich people’s lives and help partners succeed.
- TIME Ecoprojects Foundation Project about ICE

The main goal of the project is to raise awareness and change young people's attitudes about development issues and how they would support the UN Millennium Development Goals. The project is aimed at young people aged 13 to 17 and teachers. The project covers over 30 schools from different cities in the country - Ardino, Sofia, Burgas, Dryanovo and others. The project introduces Education for Development in schools through several main steps: Studying the needs of young people and teachers in order to clarify their needs and be involved in the development of the content of educational packages under the project (P2PChallengePacks, information about which can be found here: <http://www.poverty2prosperity.eu/bg/pages/>).

As a result of this TIME Ecoprojects Foundation activity, a report was prepared on the views and motivations of young people on development, as well as initial ideas for the content of the educational packages under the project (P2PChallengePacks). Development of two educational packages with materials for students. Each package contains tutorials, worksheets, tasks, graphics, photos, and other resources. The materials focus on Biodiversity and Poverty and Climate Change and the Economy. The packages are issued in a circulation of 300 pieces. They are available on the project website, including the print version.

- ECOBULTECH AD is one of the first Bulgarian organizations to receive a permit in 2014 issued by the Minister of Environment and Water to carry out activities for the recovery of obsolete electrical and electronic equipment. Together with Hefty Metals EOOD (formerly NADIN COMMERCE) in the town of Novi Iskar, where the most modern and largest plant for recycling

obsolete electrical and electronic equipment in Eastern Europe has been built, it aims to provide processing and utilization of obsolete electrical and electronic equipment, thus exempting their importers from paying product tax.

Most important however is the **Innovation and Competitiveness programme 2021-2027** part of the National Strategy. The program was developed in response to the European Green Deal. Among the three main priorities of the Program is the Circular Economy. Measures to be supported under this priority include: investment in the use of alternative raw materials, the use of recycled materials as raw materials and the reuse of materials; improving waste management in enterprises, incl. introduction of waste-free technologies; production of "green products", incl. ecodesign; shifting production from disposable to reusable products and modernizing products to extend their life; more sustainable production processes with minimal use of chemicals and harmful substances; creation of partnerships between enterprises to achieve industrial symbiosis - sharing resources, services, by-products, creating a link between productions, in which waste from one is a raw material for the other; industry platforms for the exchange of good practices.

c. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews results

In connection with the implementation of an international project, the main objectives of which are to integrate the circular economy and sustainability in the curricula of vocational high schools: "Micro- and project-based training for teaching circular economics and environmental awareness in vocational high schools" based learning program for Teaching Circular Economy and Ecological Awareness in VET"), TREE in short, a survey was conducted with representatives of associated business partners, NGOs and teachers from vocational high schools.

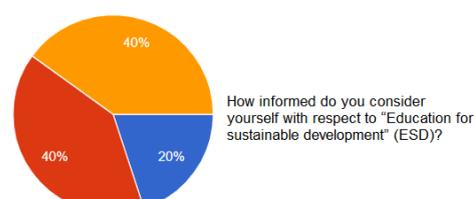
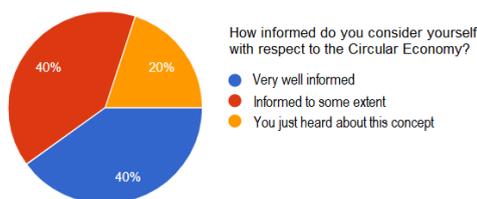
The aim of the questionnaires was to conduct a survey with the direct participation of the target group in order to better understand the opinions, insights, desires and challenges facing our partners from different groups when talking about sustainability and the circular economy.

Questionnaires: COMPANIES AND NGO

Main information

4 NGOs and 1 company took part in the survey, and the other associated company was interviewed. Two of the organizations work in the field of waste processing and circular economy, the activity of the other 4 is in the field of development and management of regional development projects.

In general, the organizations are very well or are informed to some extent on the issues of the circular economy. This is not the case with their knowledge of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), where 20% are well informed.



Most of the organizations have not only theoretical but also practical experience in regards to circular economy, which is favorable for providing theoretical and practical support in the implementation of the project. They claim experience in recycling e-waste (about 2,000 tons per year) and returning all obtained material fractions (plastic, metals and glass) to high-level production cycles. They further help customers create more sustainable and circular solutions for their raw materials, waste and products. They hold annual events related to the separate collection of renewable waste.

All participants in the survey observe an environmentally friendly lifestyle. In the examples they have given, they define their behavior as: I try to lead a life that does not generate waste, if necessary, I strive to be able to reuse this waste in some way, at least recycled. We monitor both our (and our clients') impact of all activities on the environment. The adventure tourism that we offer and develop is fully consistent with nature and minimizes the use of CO₂. We minimize paper consumption by printing a minimum of materials, especially since most of our users would require braille materials that require 4 times more paper than usual. We minimize email communication and answer only specific questions. We try to save energy and use public transport as much as possible. I collect household waste separately.

Sustainability and circular economy at your work place

All organizations implement some good practices in terms of sustainability and environmental protection at the workplace. Specifically: In each implemented project we raise awareness of the CE principle of the beneficiaries and users of our services and tourism products. We collect the waste separately and hand it over for recycling. There is no random dumping of waste. Minimum emails and minimum paper printing. We collect waste separately, use recycled materials, promote sustainable development and, above all, environmental protection. All participants in the survey do not face problems in the perception of environmental behavior in their organization and environmental protection is a priority.

Green skills

Regarding the issues related to green skills such as importance for the labor market, the respondents unanimously assessed as very important the in-depth knowledge of: Creative problem-solving, Forward-thinking, Monitoring skills, Analytical skills, Management skills, Impact quantification, Life-cycle management, lean production, Maintenance and repair skills, Science skills, Waste management, Environmental auditing, Ecosystem management, Pollution prevention, Eco-Design.

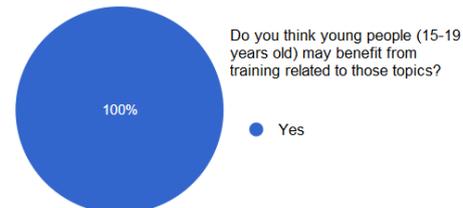
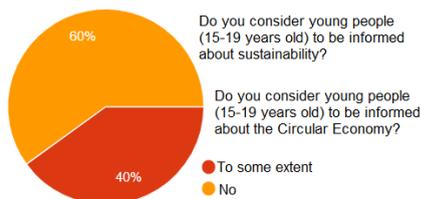
For personal knowledge, respondents hold different positions on the same topics, and equally noted three levels of importance, respectively, basic, good and general knowledge: Creative problem-solving, Forward-thinking, Monitoring skills, Analytical skills, Management skills, Impact quantification, Life-cycle management, lean production, Science skills, Waste management, Environmental auditing, Ecosystem management, Pollution prevention, Eco-Design.

In terms of the importance for their organisation, the list is as follows: Creative problem-solving and Life-cycle management, next in importance are Forward-thinking, Management

skills, Impact quantification, lean production, Science skills, Waste management and Environmental auditing. Eco-Design, Maintenance and repair skills, Life-cycle management and Monitoring skills.

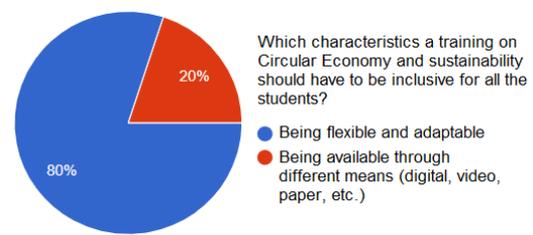
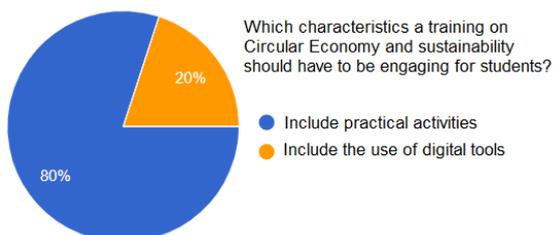
Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) for young people (students in VET)

Our business partners and NGOs believe that young people are not informed or only partially informed about sustainability and the circular economy, so 100% of respondents say that young people would benefit from such trainings.



According to the respondents, students need training in: creative thinking and design, recovery of repair skills, raising awareness and knowledge of environmental issues, critical thinking, improving their problem-solving and decision-making skills, sensitization about the need for immediate change of work style and thinking, purposeful work on the acquisition of professional skills, which will lead to both better chance to find a job and will contribute to positive changes in global society.

In determining the characteristics of a training, organizations unite around a few elements, namely to make it practical, flexible and adaptable, to use digital tools and various other tools.



Everyone agrees that companies would benefit from employees who already have skills in the sphere of circular economy and sustainability.

Circular economy, education for sustainable development and the labor market

All associated partners agree that it is imperative for the TREE project to involve business companies and NGOs.

The most important sector that needs immediate improvements and environmentally friendly policies is the plastics industry. In the explanation, the respondents answered that all sectors of the economy need improvement, just the question did not provide such an opportunity to answer.

To the question: How are green skills related to the Plastics, Agriculture and Food, Logging and Wood Processing Sector? They unanimously answered that all the listed green skills - Creative problem-solving, Forward-thinking, Monitoring skills, Analytical skills, Management skills, Impact quantification, Life-cycle management, lean production, Maintenance and repair skills, Science skills,

Waste management, Environmental auditing, Ecosystem management, Pollution prevention, Eco-Design are strongly related.

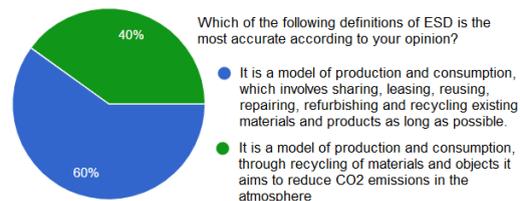
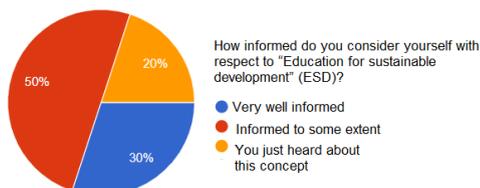
80% of the respondents expressed a desire to participate in the activities of the TREE project by helping to define green skills and create together a training course on circular economy and sustainability, and 100% expressed a desire to participate in the "TREE Network". The network will be included in the TREE platform and you will be able to share information about the organization, the production process, conferences / events that are organized on related to project topics, internship opportunities, etc.

QUESTIONNAIRE TEACHERS

Main information

The survey involved 10 teachers, of which 2 men and 8 women over the age of 50 and work experience over 15 years. They teach science, economics and entrepreneurship in a high school class with students aged 14-19.

Teachers have different levels of awareness of the circular economy, ranging from very well-informed to those who have only heard of it. Regarding the definition they give for a circular economy, they split between two definitions.



While in terms of the green economy, teachers considered themselves to be informed at a medium level, for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) they show a lower level of awareness. Most of them, in particular 70%, consider themselves informed to some extent, and 20% have only heard of it. Regarding the definition of this concept, most (80%) of the teachers agree on the following definition: It is the education that encourages changes in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to enable a more sustainable and just society for the environment and for all people.

80% of teachers have previous experience on these topics from working with students in extracurricular activities related to the development of devices for the use of renewable energy sources for water heating and purification and, from participation in national exhibitions, project work, training on the use of degradable materials, seminars and participation in a training project related to sustainable economic development. Organizing school initiatives demonstrating school social responsibility in its aspect of extending the life cycle of things through utilization, participation in the Youth in a Circular Economy program, seminars.

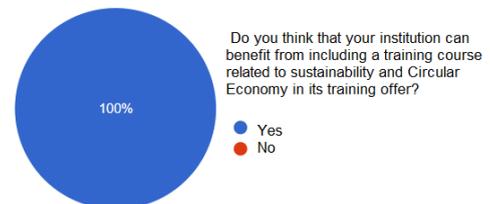
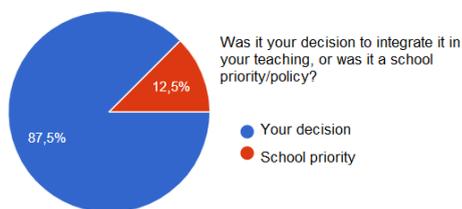
ESD and circular economy at your school

60% of the schools that are associated partners implement good practices in terms of sustainability and environmental protection, mainly expressed in separate waste collection, plastic caps, composting, refusal to use plastic cups and utensils in the teacher's room through purchased personally designated porcelain cups, and dishes and utensils for durable use and provided dishwasher, organising campaigns to promote recycling activities and environmental care. The remaining 40% of schools do not have trained teachers or the idea is not accepted by everyone in the school and thus remains undeveloped.

Despite the steps taken in schools towards sustainability and environmental protection, 80% of teachers say that they are constantly faced with challenges in terms of perception and teaching of environmental behavior. These are mainly difficult for students to perceive environmental behavior, the task is for the society and all teachers at the school, not individuals.

In an attempt to change this, 80% of teachers include information related to sustainability and the circular economy in their lessons or in the form of project assignments. Unfortunately, the opinion is taken into account that in the conditions of a pandemic there is a great demotivation and it is difficult to organize such lessons.

On the positive side, 87.5% of teachers themselves have expressed an interest in joining the project, and 100% of them believe that it is beneficial to include a course in sustainability and circular economy in their field of education.



The benefits for the institution are defined by teachers in the following areas: Improving the skills for teaching the circular economy, will promote the "circular economy" (recycling and use of waste as raw materials) as an important sector of the economy. It will form critical thinking to review all resources. Will increase and activate the ecological culture and responsible behavior of our students and they will bring this behavior and approach into their homes. The school will include in its strategy and will develop and declare a policy for environmental protection and circular economy as part of its overall policy for continuous improvement.

Green skills

Unlike companies, schools do not evaluate the importance of individual green skills to the importance of the labor market in the same way. While companies believe that in this area all green skills require deep knowledge on the subject, for teachers deep knowledge is required only for Creative problem-solving, Forward-thinking Waste management Ecosystem management,, Eco-Design and Pollution prevention, and basic to good knowledge is required in Monitoring skills, Analytical skills, Management skills, Impact quantification, Life-cycle management, lean production, Maintenance and repair skills, Science skills,, Environmental auditing.

In the field of necessary knowledge from the teachers of green skills, teachers say that they need good knowledge of Creative problem-solving, Forward-thinking, Monitoring skills and basic knowledge of Analytical skills, Management skills, Impact quantification, Life-cycle management, lean production, Maintenance and repair skills, Science skills, Waste management, Environmental auditing, Ecosystem management, Pollution prevention, Eco-Design.

At the level of students' knowledge, they determine the need for good knowledge in Creative problem-solving, Forward-thinking, Monitoring skills, Analytical skills, basic knowledge in Management skills, Impact quantification, Life-cycle management, lean production, Waste management. It appears here for the first time and the answer is: not needed at all according to the majority of surveyed teachers for the skills Maintenance and repair skills, Science skills, Environmental auditing, Ecosystem management, Pollution prevention, Eco-Design.

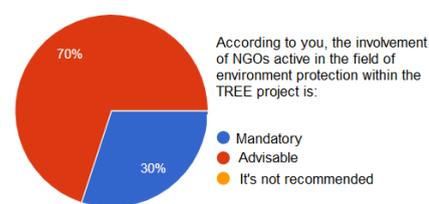
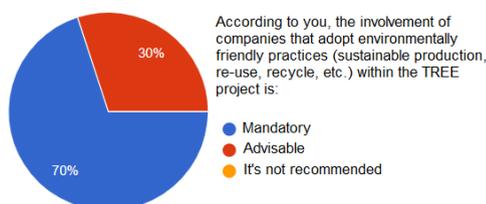
Circular economy and sustainability for the students

According to teachers, 60-70% of students are somewhat informed about the issues of sustainability and the circular economy. The remaining 20-30% are not informed at all. Which leads to the opinion of 100% of teachers that students would benefit from training related to these topics. The benefit they determine in the following directions: knowledge is important, we teachers must give them this challenge and give them the opportunity to develop their creativity, this is the future and they must be prepared for it, acquiring competencies that meet the needs of science, economics and education. Forming a new culture of behavior towards a preserved environment and sustainable development among students and young people, changing personal attitudes, improving competencies in order to better chances for future employment, de facto reduction of harmful human impact through a wider range of prepared and engaged young people.

To make an interesting and engaging training on such topics, teachers imagine the inclusion of practical activities 70% and group activities 30%. In order for a circular economy and sustainability training to be inclusive for all students, it must be flexible and adaptable 40%, be offered through various means (digital, video, paper, etc.) 30% and stimulate cooperation between students (30 %).

Circular economy, sustainability and the labour market

Teachers believe that the inclusion of companies from the sector into the project is imperative, while the inclusion of NGOs is advisable.



According to teachers, the economic sectors that need the most improvements and environmentally friendly policies are: plastics production 60%, agriculture and food production 30% and logging and wood processing 10%. The rationale for these answers is: Plastics are products that decompose over hundreds of years, the Agriculture and Food Sector is paramount, Deforestation

accelerates climate change, deforestation leads to the destruction of forest habitats and changes in forestry and precipitation regime, which causes drought.

On the question: How are green skills related to the Plastics, Agriculture and Food, Logging and Wood Processing Sector? The prevailing answer is that all listed green skills - Creative problem-solving, Forward-thinking, Monitoring skills, Analytical skills, Management skills, Impact quantification, Life-cycle management, lean production, Maintenance and repair skills, Science skills, Waste management, Environmental auditing, Ecosystem management, Pollution prevention, Eco-Design are strongly related. Unlike the companies for which this was the only answer, with the teachers we also received answers such as *somewhat related* and *weakly related*.

100% of the surveyed teachers want to participate in the TREE project and to implement the training that will be developed under the project in their school, as well as to receive additional information on the topic.

As a whole, the surveys conducted by all types of associate partners, it can be concluded that they all note the topic of sustainability and the circular economy as very important and relevant today, and green knowledge and skills as essential for future staff in the market labor. Differences are observed in the attitude of business and teachers to the degree of importance of knowledge, business attaches greater importance to knowledge of sustainability and the circular economy, while teachers believe that they are not needed to such a high degree. This makes the project even more important in order to equalize and synchronize the requirements of the business to the staff for knowledge and skills in this new field, the curricula and the requirements of the teachers to the importance of the topics of sustainability and circular economy.

An interview was also conducted with one of the partner organizations. The main path to be taken in the education of students must meet the needs of today's society in the direction of environmental behavior and sustainability. The respondent identifies the following important guidelines:

- For understanding the concept of circular economy, it is of key importance to develop knowledge, values, attitudes, leading to positive actions aiming at transition to zero waste.

- In our organization, for the purpose of lowering the use of wood material, we have recycled paper for printing unofficial documents and making notes. Together with that, most of the documents we send via email or use them directly from the computer without printing them unnecessarily.

- The introduction of ecological behavior in our society has always been a challenge, because people often refuse to see the point. Representatives of our organization participate in various eco-activities in the region, such as "Save a tree" and a number of cleaning campaigns.

- Possession of skills for eco-friendly employment opportunities is gaining importance in our times. Therefore it is necessary that we pay attention to covering the requirements for various positions included in the green economy strategies, because the transition towards such an economy leads to structural changes in the labor markets. The transition mostly affects the already existing professions. The practice shows that vocational profiles in the different sectors change substantially under the pressure of pandemics, digitalization and globalization, which requires new different skills.

- At present, different programs are providing training opportunities for young people. It is of major importance for the training courses provided to young people, seeking job opportunities, to cover skills and qualifications, which are important for the labor market, including skills, which are relevant to the "green" economy, which are gaining positions in relevance and necessity. Since the probability of young people with low qualifications to be unemployed is greater compared to those who are qualified, the training courses should be focused on providing vocational skills, which can lead to sustainable employment.

- The human factor is at the base of the success of each and every organization. Employees with high qualifications are responsible for the quality of provided products and services, hence the competitiveness of a certain company. The availability of people qualified in these new areas is of key importance for the development of the company.

- The transition to circular economy will lower pollution, will ameliorate the supply of raw materials issue, will intensify the innovations and competitiveness. Such a change has a potential to at least 1% to the GDP of the EU and to create new jobs in Europe. The users will gain access to more sustainable and economic products, which is of great importance.

d. Green skills and green jobs

When we are considering green skills and their relation to the so –called “green “jobs, there are a number of examples of programmes, projects and national strategies that need to be reviewed. Already in 2013, statements were released that the business needs employees with "green skills". Tim Belkan, CEO of the Institute for Environmental Management and Evaluation, to HR Magazine (IEMA) was quoted and published on the main career website in Bulgaria. “His advice to managers is to think that in times of environmental change it is logical to change the way business is done. The fact is that important natural resources are drastically reduced, energy costs are rising and the sectors affected are many. In practice, this means that the attitude towards the environment is becoming the new hot spot for any responsible business that wants to be sustainable. More far-sighted managers already have a clear message in this trend - every company should have its appropriate and well-trained employees who have developed "green skills" to work.”(Karieri.bg)

An example of the focus and prioritisation of green skills and hence green jobs, is the project "New skills and competencies - for a green and ecological Bulgaria" with a goal to ensure a rapid transition of unemployed people to new and restructured jobs by providing training to people to acquire new competencies and qualifications to increase fitness and adaptability, as well as their subsequent employment. The project implementation activities will involve 1,157 unemployed persons from the target groups registered in the Labor Office Directorates.

The main target groups of the project are:

- Unemployed persons with registration over 6 months;
- Released persons due to the epidemic situation, incl. with professional qualification not in demand on the labor market;

- Inactive persons wishing to work, incl. discouraged persons, incl. from districts with an unemployment rate above the national average; without qualification and with low general education; with a period of inactivity of more than 2 years.

It is crucial to note that the need for green skills and the emergence of green job opportunities has been acknowledged at the national operative level. In 2021, under the Operational Program "Human Resources Development" 2021-2027 was announced that over BGN 3.7 million will be poured into "green" and "white" jobs. The money is divided between 12 employment-related goals, some of which will be allocated for the creation and development of "green" and "white" jobs. This initiative by the Ministry of Labour and Social policy is a big step ahead in the right direction. During the duration of the programme, it is set out that more than 350,000 employed and unemployed people will be trained in new skills according to the future requirements of the labor market. About 93,000 young people will receive support to find a job after completing their education. According to the news report, the idea of an environmentally friendly, competitive green economy as a contribution to sustainable development and efficient use of resources is associated with structural changes in employment - remodeling of existing jobs, closing others or creating new ones. With this programme, the government further acknowledges that in order to facilitate the adaptation of the workforce and education and training systems, targeted intervention by public authorities is needed to avoid skills shortages, facilitate the transition to new jobs and increase the capacity of education and training to respond to the demand for new skills and qualification requirements. (Miteva, 2017)

IV. Review of VET schools- current status, educational priorities and Green skills.

According to the latest national statistics for education, currently on the territory of Bulgaria there are 350 VET schools and 21 professional colleges. The profile of these educational institutions varies. As a whole they provide a wide range of educational priorities, courses and specialisations. The leading spheres are fashion, restaurant management, chef courses, agriculture and tourism.

ECVET, which is the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training, a tool that supports lifelong learning and flexibility in learning pathways, including EU Mobility (<http://eu-mobility.eu/what-is-ecvet/>) has been greatly influential in terms of VET schools in Bulgaria. In 2014, the Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA) marked the beginning of regulations governing the accumulation and credit transfer in VET. In the same year, the section "Validation of professional knowledge, skills and competencies" was introduced in the Act. (Tsvetanska, Dimitrova, Mihailova, Vocational education Volume 20). The application of the ECVET principles in the development of National Educational Standards for the Acquisition of Professional Qualifications makes it possible to ensure transparency and comparability of professional qualifications at both national and European level. Since 2014, this process of implementation and integration has been carried out through cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science, NAVET and HRDC. A national team of ECVET experts was also formed with the aim to promote the credit transfer policy in VET.

According to research, in 2018 Bulgaria ranked 23rd (out of 28 countries analyzed) in the Skills Index. Bulgaria's position is the best in terms of the third component - 10th place (index 64) for compliance of skills with the requirements and expectations of employers. However, according to

the same statistics, in the component of skills development Bulgaria has a significantly weaker position - 25th place (index 38), and for the activation of developed skills in the transition from the educational system to the labor market Bulgaria ranks 27th (penultimate), with index 11, from which it can be concluded that graduates do not have attitudes to the realization of the labor market). This clearly shows the current need for the development of new skills, in accordance with the needs of the market and the sustainable future, in order to ensure employability of VET graduates.

As an example, according to a manual focusing on VET and sustainable development, developed by AgriTrain in 2020, agricultural vocational training is particularly suitable for the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). In this document, it is stated that teachers in agricultural vocational schools strive to meet the training requirements for sustainable development. They are constantly informed in this regard in order to better motivate their students and to arouse their interest in possible work in this field. It is argued that the teachers do face challenges, such as lack of up-to date resources and a slow shift in political priorities. Within the same sector, reportedly, teaching material has to comply with National Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Agricultural Sector in Bulgaria 2014-2020.

There are a number of examples of VET schools that engage in sustainable projects and teachings. This practice has been growing exponentially in the recent years and it shows the clear shift of priorities and the move of sustainability and “green skills” closer to the forefront.

Here is an example:

"The goals for sustainable development - the power of youth action" is the name of the project in which the Vocational School of Tourism "Dr. Vasil Beron" in Veliko Tarnovo participates. The project is of the United Nations Society in Bulgaria and is implemented with the support of Bridge 47 and the European Union. There are 22 approved schools in the country, each with a team of teachers and students. The team of the High School of Tourism includes Gergana Terzieva, a student of XI grade, majoring in "Tourist Animation" and Eng. Slavka Prodanova, a teacher of economics. (BorbaBg, 2020)

The Ministry of Environment, already in 2012 conducted an "Environmental Education" Roundtable where the integration of education for sustainable development and environmental protection in schools to be horizontal by being integrated into the curricula of various subjects. The round table, organized jointly by the Ministry of Environment and Water and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science already then asserted that " the education system is so important for changing consumer behavior, which has conquered the world for decades, was proved by a representative national sociological survey we conducted about a year ago and it unequivocally showed that people in Bulgaria believe that it is the education system has a crucial role to play in changing attitudes towards environmental care. (MOEW)

It is important to note that a Memorandum of Cooperation on Environmental Protection between the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Environment and Water was signed in January 2004. Since then, what has been observed is the emergence of active NGOs, 3 DIUU, which provide courses on various aspects of the environment, as well as opportunities for obtaining a

professional qualification degree; integrations of ESD topics and an increase in the number of extracurricular activities related to sustainability. A review of the Programme for education for Sustainable Development in Bulgaria suggests that there is still no fully implemented model for ESD in VET schools, as well as Insufficient training of pedagogical staff regarding the limited use of the interdisciplinary approach and the methods for developing attitudes and skills in the teaching process. Furthermore, the same review (Education for Sustainable Development Program in Bulgaria) states that:

- There are no training materials for effective ESD;
- Difficulties in finding information on ESD;
- Limited financial support from national sources for funding ESD events and initiatives
- Insufficient cooperation and coordination.

Even though ESD is currently not fully integrated and it is not the main priority of VET schools in Bulgaria, there have been positive developments. Namely, the establishment of an Advisory Board by order of the Minister of Education and Science to support ESD in Bulgaria; support for ESD initiatives by the Ministry of Environment and Water and the Ministry of Education and Science; and the growing interest from both students and teachers to receive training in ESD and green skills.

V. Review of sectors included in the TREE Project within Bulgaria

a. Plastic sector

Out of the three sectors included in the project, the plastic sector is the most regulated in terms of sustainability and has so far seen the biggest positive development. According to the National STRATEGY FOR TRANSITION TO CIRCULAR ECONOMY 2021-2027, the production of plastics in primary form in Bulgaria in 2019 amounted to 175 thousand tons, while the production of plastic products is significantly higher and exceeds 500 thousand tons. The significant production of plastic products in the country provides an opportunity for recycled plastics. Bulgaria has made significant investments in recycling plastic, and has continued to exceed its capacity for that. The data shows that it is estimated to exceed 150,000 tonnes which would allow the recycling of most of the plastic waste collected. A number of companies have emerged within the private sector that deal specifically with that and are growing. It is fair to say however, that additional efforts are required. Recently, in 2021, the government adopted an Ordinance on reducing the impact of certain plastic products on the environment, which introduces requirements of European legislation. Reportedly, Measures are being introduced to reduce the consumption of disposable plastic cups and food cans, as well as new requirements for the design and production of certain products in order to reduce their waste and encourage recycling. (Darik News). In addition to that, local companies are obliged to invest 30% of recycled raw materials in beverage containers. Both the pressure from and the information to the consumers has been increasing in the last several years. National information campaigns, collection campaigns with a charitable profile and additional requirements for the expansion of existing systems for collection of packaging waste have really pushed the green agenda.

Restaurants and take-aways have a cap on the use of plastic resources and consumers more and more use reusable bags, separate their waste and focus on products and stores that provide a sustainable alternative.

b. Agrifood sector

The Ministry of Agriculture is the governing institution of the sector. It has implemented The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is an integral part of the agreements that established the European Community (EC). The CAP is based on three fundamental principles: free trade within the Community based on common prices, preference for Community produce in Community markets, and joint financial responsibility.

The Vision of the Republic of Bulgaria for CAP after 2020 concludes with the following goals:

- to maintain its character as a common EU policy, including in its financial dimension;
- to ensure food security and the health of citizens;
- to ensure the sustainability and competitiveness of agriculture;
- to ensure a level playing field for all farmers in the single market;
- to promote the socio-economic cohesion of rural areas;
- to support the development of small and medium-sized agricultural holdings;
- be simple and understandable for beneficiaries and European citizens;
- be environmentally friendly, promote the efficient use of natural resources and measures to combat climate change

The last goal is of particular importance not only for the TREE project, but for the sector as a whole. Currently, based on the results of research on the environmental sustainability of Bulgarian agriculture through a wide range of criteria, the sector is at a good level (Mitova, D. 2021). From all of the criteria concerning the environmental sustainability with an unsatisfactory level stands out the one associated with bad Maintenance of natural habitats, conservation and enhancement of habitat species. All the others are either at a satisfactory or very good level. This would suggest that currently the sector is rather sustainable. There are of course aspects that could be improved and there are more and more opportunities in the sector both for sustainable development and “green” employment.

For instance, according to the latest Eurostat data from 2018, Bulgaria ranks lower than most EU countries in terms of land used for organic farming, with only 2.4% of agricultural land farmed organically. However, even this represents a 230% increase since 2012, which has been put down in large part to the availability of additional EU subsidies for organic farming. (Nikolov, D. 2021). There has been a trend of young people, moving back to the village and engaging in agriculture. According to resources this has been due to two main reasons- after Bulgaria joined the EU, a lot of funding was diverted to agrifood projects, and people want to get closer to nature and find new opportunities to do that through the sector. It is important to note however, that firstly, this trend has not encompassed vast number of people, and secondly, there is currently a concern amongst farmers in relation to bio-products and the Green deal. According to a recent report, Bulgarian farmers forecast weaker yields, with lower quality, and hence lower incomes, as a result of the new green policies of the EU. At the heart of their concerns is the significant reduction in the use of pesticides and fertilizers by 2030, writes EURACTIV Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Ministry of Agriculture told at the end of 2020 received recommendations for the reduction of pesticide use from the EC. The analysis of the economic effects has not yet been shared and there is insignificant information in terms of measures that would be implemented. Grain is the leading agricultural crop in Bulgaria, as it is being produced in over 80% of the fields in the country. Kostadinov, Chairman of the National Association of Grain Producers claims that the “use of pesticides and fertilizers in Bulgaria is below the EU average. Reducing their use by 50% means that the country would be uncompetitive in the common EU market.” Concerns in regards to prices, availability of substitutes and lower yields make many farmers worried and less open to implementing “green” changes. According to Prof. Ivan Kiryakov from Dobrudzha Agricultural Institute however, “the new EU policy is not to be underestimated and is in

the right direction. There are other possibilities through which crops could be made more sustainable naturally”.

Another aspect of agrifood and its relations to sustainability is food waste. In Bulgaria, reportedly the total amount of food waste generated is significant - about 500 thousand tons. Bulgaria is now in the process of preparing a National Program for Prevention and Reduction of Food Loss, which will cover all stages of the food chain: primary production; processing and production; retail and other distribution; restaurants and catering services; and households.

A key aspect is biomass energy production. Currently, in the country, its production exceeds 1 million tons, which represents over 10% of the total energy consumption in the country. Households consume 70% of the energy produced from biomass. However, according to the National Strategy for transition to circular economy, there is a very large untapped potential in the recovery of solid agricultural waste from corn stalks for grain, sunflower and others, which is estimated at over 2 million tons per year. ("ENVIRONMENT 2014 - 2020" STRATEGY FOR TRANSITION TO CIRCULAR ECONOMY 2021-2027: Project 2020). This shows the potential for development and the integration of a sustainable and profitable practice within the sector.

c. Wood sector

According to the results of a project conducted in 2018, the forest territories of Bulgaria occupies 4,148,114 ha or 37.4% of the country's territory. Of these, 3,774,778 million ha (91%) are forests. The state ownership over the forest territories prevails - 74.5% of their total area. Non-state forest territories represent 23.5%, incl. municipal - 12%, private individuals and legal entities - 11%, religious organizations - 0.5% and forests created on former agricultural lands - 2%. (Chobanova, R, Kotzarev, L., 2018) . The same report, as well as numerous news articles and other official reporting state that illegal logging and poaching are one of the most important problems related to the protection of Bulgarian forests. For the period 2005-2010 the average annual growth increased from 14.1 to 14.4 million cubic meters of wood. (Chobanova, R, Kotzarev, L., 2018) This is due to issues of “grey economy”, insufficient funding and control measures. Companies are not held liable, and numerous individual also tap into this resource without adhering to the set out regulations.

Another issue related to the wood sector reportedly is the fact that due to forests’ locations, landscape and problems with infrastructure that does not allow the movement of timber, there is an “excessive use of wood” in certain areas with a disregard to the effects on the environment.

According to the National Strategy for Development of the Forest Sector in Bulgaria, 2013, some of the main challenges to the development and sustainability of the sector are:

- low labor productivity;
- difficult access to funding; Chapter One. Trends in the forest sector - global and regional challenges
- lack of opportunities to use funds from the EU structural funds to invest in the renewal of equipment in logging, machinery, production lines and transport of forest products;
- insufficient participation (support) by banks in investment projects;
- low share of certified forest areas and certified forest entrepreneurs

Although the sector provides opportunities and can be developed in a sustainable and profitable manner, the required actions have not been taken. The sector is directly related to the construction sector, which is quite prominent in Bulgaria, as well as to the energy sector.

It is clear that there is both a need and interest in moving the sector to a more “green” exploitation. AN example for that is The Good Wood project, Clarifications on EU-funded Green Social Dialogue for Employment and Social Innovation, aims to be active by strengthening social dialogue, reorganizing production and management in the timber and wood processing sector, focusing on a sustainable economy and market labor. The Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, together with Podkrepa, organized the first national event under the GOOD WOOD project on "Challenges to social dialogue in the green circular economy with a focus on the wood processing sector", which aimed to strengthen social dialogue and reorganize production. The management of the project, which started in early 2019, covers business organizations, trade unions and universities from Italy, Portugal, Belgium and Bulgaria. The role of employers' organizations and trade unions in promoting the green dimension of social dialogue was also part of the discussions. It is expected that the results of the project, as it continues, will be beneficial in strengthening the dialogue and pushing for positive change.

VI. Conclusions

This report aimed at presenting information related to the national context in regards to the main themes included in the TREE project. The results of the research suggest that ESD is not yet fully integrated. The National strategies related to sustainability, the environment and circular economy however, are a clear indicator that this is going to change. The increasing need for green skills and the planned investments in both CE and green job opportunities, direct us to the conclusion that the TREE project directly corresponds to the objectives of the state. Based on the survey conducted and the questionnaires, both VET teachers and company representatives agree that ESD is going to be of great importance if Bulgaria is to keep up with the rest of the world. Currently there is no unified ESD programme in VET schools approved by the government, however numerous NGOs and projects are active in supporting and providing opportunities. There is a clear interest from VET professionals, current and future students ,and of course, employers to have ESD and support the development of green skills in youth. The 3 sectors included in the projects have also been reviewed- the plastic sector is more regulated and there are clear steps being taken at a governmental, private sector and consumer level. The Green Deal is reportedly worrisome to farmers, however funding and support in the agro-food sector could be sufficient to ensure the transition, given the vast potential that the sector has. In terms of the wood sector- again the private sector is getting together with the government to find solutions and move to a greener and more sustainable future.

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