

Article

What Do They Feel, Do, and Expect? The Young Generation's Perception of Environmental Problems and Sustainable Development Goals in the Context of Quality of Life

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the need to rethink, revision, and modify the sustainable development goals since changes have never been so unpredictable in terms of future events. While material welfare has long been identified and given attention, the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of health security and socio-psychological well-being. The aim of this article is to identify the young generation's perception of environmental problems and sustainable development goals in the context of quality of life. In January 2022, we conducted an online survey (CAWI) among 120 young adults aged 21–28, who were asked, i.e., to assess current ecological threats, economic security, and social problems and to reevaluate the goals of sustainable development. One of the general conclusions is that global threats are more important for young people than local ones, and future threats are more important than the present ones. The results indicate a high awareness and sensitivity among the young generation to the important elements of the sustainable development goals, particularly regarding the elimination of hunger, the access to potable water, and providing education in the global dimension. The research results reflect the expectations of the young generation regarding the implementation of sustainable development goals, especially concerning environmental and social aspects.

Keywords: quality of life; sustainability goals; perception of young generation; environment



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1. Introduction

Influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, social sciences are currently seeking directions of change for the principles and goals of development. Change has long been taken for granted, but it has never been so unpredictable in terms of results, which is referred to as “the black swan effect” [1]. Macroeconomic phenomena and processes constantly evolve, making it difficult to formulate accurate diagnoses and forecasts. Additionally, during a pandemic, forecasts and strategies work only in the short term, especially if they have been formulated on a global scale and in the long term. The pandemic has forced the update of forecasts, including reassessment, verification, and modification of the goals previously formulated. This also applies to the sustainable development goals (SDGs). For years, material well-being has been emphasized, while the pandemic has revealed the importance and value of health safety and mental well-being. The epidemiological situation in Poland and throughout the world has changed the approach to many issues, including the assessment of quality of life and the importance of the socioeconomic development goals. The impact of the pandemic extends beyond just health security. Epidemiological hazard has impacted the economic activity and maintaining and creating jobs, which is related to the economic security of people. Beliefs and expectations have also changed, as uncertainty, restriction of physical contact, as well as a certain degree of restriction to freedom made people realize the importance of psychosocial well-being over the material one. Measuring

quality of life from the individual's point of view considers primarily personal satisfaction and contentment with life. At the collective level, quality of life integrates many elements of human life in the environment as well as material and mental security. There are many directions of research on quality of life, including the trend, which focuses on quality of the environment and its protection. This is also related to health and its protection [2].

In the face of the pandemic, the impact of the sense of the value of health and its safety on quality of life has acquired a new dimension. Especially in the first year of the pandemic (2020), the main problems were health safety and people's lives. In the following year, global issues related to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals have returned. On the other hand, environmental degradation and overexploitation of natural resources took on a new meaning in 2022 due to the strict requirements to reduce greenhouse gas emissions [3].

The COVID-19 pandemic is an extraordinary global event that is incomparable to the past experiences of young people. At the same time, it represented something unpredictable and uncertain in the future perspective, which has influenced young people's perceptions of their quality of life. In this regard, the following questions could be posed: How do young people feel when faced with global multidimensional crises? What do they see as important and threatening in their life? What do they do to impact and model their environment? What do they expect to be ensured in the nearest future? This article aims to verify the perception of environmental issues in relation to sociopsychological issues as well as to assess the significance of the SDGs in the context of quality of life of the younger generation. Research on the perception of the above problems was carried out using the questionnaire method, i.e., taking into account the impact of the pandemic on the perception of quality of life and SDGs.

2. The Human–Environment Relationship in the Assessment of Quality of Life during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The concept of quality of life is evolving as people's preferences change in a shifting environment. Initially, quality of life was believed to be determined by physical, material, and social well-being. Over time, the emotional aspect that influences personal satisfaction was noticed. Over the years, quality of life has been identified with economic development and wealth of citizens and with a high standard of material life based on consumption and management of material goods. However, the image of *homo economicus* as a character focused on maximizing own benefits, acquiring material goods, and making rational economic decisions in isolation from human nature and socio-moral issues was also criticized in the context of assessing quality of life [4]. It turns out that quality of life is not a simple function of material wealth. The welfare paradox shows that the quantity of life, understood as the amount of material goods, does not always equal the quality of life, which is understood as living a good life [5]. In the 1970s, two distinctive orientations of quality of life emerged in the criticism of consumerism. One of the orientations interprets quality of life from the point of view of social research using indicators measuring the standard of material life. The second orientation, on the other hand, is about quality of life understood and evaluated in light of the importance of social relationships and dependence on the group as well as opposition to the treatment of human beings and environmental degradation [2]. As a result of various interpretations of factors influencing quality of life, five main trends have emerged in the literature:

- (1) A trend based on the economic dimension of the standard of living [6];
- (2) A trend concerning the sociopsychological aspects of life [7–9];
- (3) A trend focused on quality of the environment and its protection [10,11];
- (4) A trend related to health and its safety [11,12];
- (5) A trend relating to urbanization and infrastructure [13,14].

All these trends are correlated although each of them can constitute a separate subject of research. Most often, it is indicated that quality of life depends on meeting both material needs, which make up prosperity, and non-material needs, especially the need for social

relationships, self-realization, and happiness, which constitute psychological well-being. While material welfare can be said to be an objective state, psychological well-being is subjective. There are two approaches to assessing quality of life—indicators measuring the objective level of quality of life and indicators of subjective well-being [15]. The objective aspect of quality of life is usually equated with well-being, which is related to the standard of living, consumption, as well as economic and living conditions [16]. For example, the human development index (HDI) introduced by the United Nations (UN) is the statistic indicator to rank countries according to human development understood as a standard indicator of quality of life and the level of social development [17]. The subjective aspect, on the other hand, is related to well-being, which ensures satisfaction in life and is created by social position, health, self-development and leisure time [18]. The concept of well-being is also identified with social relationships, trust, and participation and focuses on the creation and exchange of shared social values [19]. An attempt to organize the measures of subjective assessment of quality of life was undertaken, among others, by P. Dolan and R. Metcalfe [20], who developed the subjective well-being measure (SWB), which includes the evaluation of life satisfaction, experience of mental well-being, and *eudaimonia* to inform and evaluate public policy. Over time, the growing interest in making the international measure of well-being more coherent and structured resulted in the United Nations high-level meeting on wellbeing and happiness (April 2012), the World Happiness Report 2013 [21], and the OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being [22,23].

Despite many empirical approaches to the question of quality of life, its measurement at the individual level remains a challenge. According to Czapiński [24], the happiness of an individual consists of three layers. The most hidden is the will to live, which is an element of human mental well-being. Then comes satisfaction and a sense of happiness, which depends on individual human experiences, and the outer layer consists of moments of happiness and satisfaction, which depend on one's current situation [24]. The psychological well-being refers to the extent to which individuals experience positive emotions in life with regards to meaningful and affectionate relationships with others, personal growth, purpose in life, and autonomy free of social pressures [25]. There are many definitions of happiness and its components, and its meaning often depends on the context [26]. In the context of quality of life, the subjective sense of happiness is sometimes defined as a global evaluation of life [27,28] and subjective well-being as evaluations of life quality [28,29]. On the other hand, the feeling of well-being is impacted by the sense of security, i.e., the absence of a perceived threat. Psychological well-being can be compromised when negative emotions are extreme or long-lasting so as to obstruct one's ability to function in daily life [30]. Thus, these can be called internal determinants of well-being.

On the other hand, external determinants of the sense of well-being can be related to, e.g., sensing the beauty of nature or, on the contrary, the sense of threat caused by its destruction. Due to changes in the value system, the natural environment is treated as the highest good, which is reflected in the growing social sensitivity to various types of pollution. The condition of the environment and its protection play an increasingly important role in assessing quality of life, but the perception of ecological problems depends on social awareness. Furthermore, social awareness and empathy is also diversified by person's emotional intelligence. Machova et al.'s [31] study showed that there is a relationship between age group and perceptions of the importance of emotional intelligence and that the level of emotional intelligence is actually influenced by age group. The environmental concerns are perceived by the majority of people as a threat to their well-being. According to Moser and Robin [32], environmental concerns, among another two factors, were generally estimated as the most worrying in the context of quality of life. Environmental psychology, which is the study of human relationships with the environment, includes three levels of analysis. First, it focuses on the effects of environmental perception, spatial cognition, and personality on human behavior. Secondly, it verifies their environmental management. Third, it analyzes human interactions with nature and the role of human psychological characteristics in the process of climate change [33].

In this context, quality of life is determined by environmental awareness, i.e., a set of information, knowledge, and beliefs about the natural environment and the perception of the relationship between the condition of the environment and its nature and the conditions and quality of human life [34]. Human economic pressure on the environment causes its degradation, and thus, the quality of human life deteriorates. The most common ecological problems are air and water pollution, acid rain, the greenhouse effect, the ozone hole, and soil degradation. Most of these problems arise from human activity although some are also the result of Earth's natural processes [35].

Nobel Prize winner W. Nordhaus pointed to climate change and its negative effects on humans as well as the need to counteract them. He predicted that the effects of climate change is the most difficult and uncertain task of all global warming processes [36]. Most often, it is assumed that the environment:

- Supports life processes, as it contains the necessary ingredients for life, health, and well-being;
- Provides the necessary natural resources (renewable and non-renewable);
- Absorbs the side effects of production and consumption processes;
- Creates a space for rest, recreation, and health.

The human–environment interaction should be an important element in considering quality of life because humans and the environment influence each other. However, a holistic approach to human well-being requires integrating self-understanding as well as human–human, human–system, and human–nature relationships [37]. As studies show, being in a state of well-being helps people cope with the regular stress of life and contribute to their community [38]. Nevertheless, unexpected events, such as pandemics or natural disasters, produce significant emotional pressure that has a harmful impact on their mental well-being [39].

During the pandemic, health security was a particularly important element of quality of life. It also had an impact on its psychological and socio-psychological aspects, which are associated with the consequences of the pandemic, e.g., self-isolation, loneliness, lack of contact in the real world, anxiety, and uncertainty. Uncertainty is defined as the presence of ambiguous, complex, unpredictable conditions, and a lack of information availability and consistency, in which people doubt public, general, and their own knowledge [40]. Simultaneously, the pandemic has deteriorated the economic aspects of quality of life by changing working conditions, e.g., lack of health care products or remote work, as well as lowering income or layoffs. Preexisting problems, such as neglect in health care, social exclusion, climate change, and armed conflicts, have become a threat. Major catastrophic events, such as natural disasters or epidemics such as COVID-19, pose a great threat to both physical and mental well-being [25]. An important element of the assessment of well-being is the perception of surrounding phenomena. It turns out that the perceived threat level has a greater effect on mental well-being than the objective one. Therefore, individuals who perceive a higher threat experience a greater risk of major consequences on subjective mental well-being. Paredes et al. [41] showed that perceived threats of the pandemic generate uncertainty and fear, increasing stress and vulnerability, which causes a major impact on mental well-being.

During the pandemic, the elderly were the most protected as the group at greatest risk of severe disease. However, as shown by the research of Bidzan-Bluma et al. [42], despite the fact that older people are particularly at risk of developing a severe case of COVID-19, people in the age group 60+ rated their quality of life, well-being, life satisfaction, and sleep quality better than all the younger control groups. The same conclusions were reached by Cao et al. [43], who showed that during and after the quarantine period, students complained about poor psychological well-being and mental illness. The experience of stress and anxiety during quarantine that young people were facing was mainly caused by academic work delays and lack of socialization. In her recent studies, Adamczyk-Kowalczyk [44] investigated which dimension of the quality of life of young adults was most important to them and which was of lesser importance. As a result, respondents

ranked contentment with interpersonal relationships as the most important component of their quality of life. Satisfying material needs ranked as the second most frequently selected component, and a sense of personal fulfillment was third. At the same time, within all the three categories, there was a significant deterioration with regard to the sense of satisfaction compared with the past. The most significant decrease was in contentment with interpersonal relationships (from 3.8 to 2.65); a significant decrease was also observed for satisfaction of material needs (from 3.67 to 2.84). The smallest difference in relation to the past concerned the sense of personal fulfillment, where there was a decrease from 3.18 to 2.65. However, when analyzing expectations for the future, the highest hopes are associated with an improvement in the sense of personal fulfillment (4.20) and contentment with interpersonal relationships (4.16). The lowest expectations are related to improved satisfaction of material needs (3.71) [44]. As other studies consistently show, social environment support could protect individuals from developing mental health problems while they experience a difficult time [45]. Limiting social contacts was a painful and burdensome consequence of the pandemic. This shows how important a multi-dimensional social support is, e.g., subjective and objective support, as well as seeking social support [46].

3. Sustainable Development Goals in the Context of Quality of Life in a Rapidly Changing World

As mentioned above, during the pandemic, the most important needs were to protect life and health safety. As the sense of homeostasis was disturbed, stress, uncertainty, loneliness, and the fear of hospitalization appeared, and quality of life acquired a new meaning. Previously assessed mainly from the point of view of the material standard of living and economic development, it has now gained a special social dimension. Although difficult to assess objectively, quality of life should now be one of the most important dimensions of sustainable development, which is often emphasized by the term “sustainable socio-economic development” [47]. The idea of sustainable development should be oriented towards the safety and development of people. According to the first principle of sustainable development, the subject of sustainable development is man, who has the right to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature. The principles of sustainable development emphasize the right to development of the present and future generations [48]. Sustainable development should be oriented towards human well-being, ensuring material welfare but also health security and life in a clean environment. To this end, it is necessary not only to protect natural resources but also the quality of the ecosystem. This imposes an obligation on humans to control their activities in the environment due to responsibility for its condition and the prospect of existence [49]. Since human development is the most important in sustainable development, it should be included in formulated and implemented goals. Seventeen updated sustainable development goals (Table 1) were adopted during the 70th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. To implement them, several to dozens of tasks were assigned [50].

Table 1. Sustainable Development Goals—Agenda 2030 [50].

G1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
G2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
G3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
G4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
G5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
G6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
G7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all

Table 1. *Cont.*

G8	Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and full and productive employment and decent work for all
G9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
G10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
G11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable
G12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
G13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
G14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development
G15	Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems; sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
G16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels
G17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

The premise of sustainable development is to reduce the scope of poverty and social exclusion while ensuring similar living conditions for future generations. Sustainable development should enable economic development to maintain the right balance between the development needs necessary to improve the standard of living and environmental protection [51]. In the light of sustainable development requirements, environmental psychology plays a major role in addressing the human–environment congruity. Human–environment congruity usually refers to the interrelation between individuals and their environment in view of the match between individual life satisfaction and objective standards of living [52]. The pandemic verified sustainable development activities and made social issues critical, especially activities related to the safety of life and health of the society as a whole. Important areas of sustainable development include environmental protection issues in the context of the circular economy, counteracting climate change, and protecting biodiversity [53].

The social dimension of sustainable development is related to the generally understood social interest. It is associated with human health care, respect for human rights and gender equality, as well as improvement of quality of life of the present and future generation. As regards the environmental dimension of sustainable business development, the measures should concern reducing pollution, especially climate changes, improving air and water quality, and rationalizing the use of natural resources.

The goals of sustainable development should be oriented towards the safety of human life. To that end, it is necessary to ensure access to natural resources, including clean water and air but, as the pandemic has shown, also to protect human health and life. While man can have an impact in terms of environmental protection, because the ways to protect it are known, the pandemic was unknown and unpredictable. In interpreting the social aspects of sustainable development, the emphasis should be changed from material welfare to first ensuring the mental well-being of humans. Sustainable development goals require verification, with special attention to ensuring human health safety, especially in terms of bio-hazards.

The pandemic increased business activity related to safety protection of the population, especially in 2020. It also raised business expectations in terms of state aid support. However, as Nobel laureate L. Hurwicz pointed out, corporations tend to falsify the motives of their activities [54]. Although economic activity creates jobs and provides products and services expected by society, it also consumes natural resources and pollutes the environ-

ment. Corporations are held responsible not only for economic effects but for all kinds of side effects, such as pollution and unemployment [55]. Business is expected not only to provide goods and services but also to participate in solving social problems. In 2021, the main challenges were environmental problems related to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The degradation of the environment, which has been increasing for many years, and the overexploitation of natural resources require significant spending for the restructuring of the energy industry. One of the objective reasons for the failure to achieve the Goals was the pandemic as a situation with an unknown scale of unforeseen changes and costs. In 2022, it was the hitherto unseen scale of Ukrainian war refugees fleeing mainly to Poland. Regardless of these objective causes, environmental pollution affects people's physical and mental health and thus their quality of life.

Simultaneous implementation of the SDGs in all areas—economic, environmental, and social—is problematic. The key limitation in the systemic approach to sustainable development is the lack of a clear way to compromise between the goals of different systems—economic, environmental, and social [56]. As research shows, one of the solutions is to prioritize the implementation of individual goals and find their interrelations [57].

It should be noted that the perception of the significance and sequence of the implementation of the SDGs can be modified by many factors, including the situational context and the group who are making the judgment. As indicated by Sonetti, Brown, and Naboni [58], working upon strategies tailor-made for specific target of people is far more effective than promoting general policies for sustainable consumption. Therefore, the social role of education should be injecting behavioral change in future citizens and decision makers, considering the “acting” or the “going” as a form of responsibility itself [58]. However, a change in the approach to the implementation of the sustainable development goals requires more than awareness among the young generation. It should also take into account the perception of all SDG areas in the context of quality of life.

Learning about the environmental awareness of the younger generation and the validity of the Sustainable Development Goals formulated at the United Nations forum from the 2030 perspective was the premise of this article. A large part of the younger generation are students; thus, learning about their perception of environmental, economic, and social problems is crucial from the perspective of their local and global role in the near future.

4. Methods

The research was carried out using the questionnaire method, i.e., the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI), which is one of the most frequently used digital research techniques. When assessing quality of life and setting environmental, economic, and social goals, it is important to take into account not only quantitative indicators but also the qualitative dimension. Hence, questionnaire techniques are an extremely valuable tool in measuring perception and subjective assessment of important elements of environmental, social, and economic functioning.

The study was conducted in January 2022, after two harsh years of the COVID-19 pandemic but just before Russia's attack in Ukraine. Out of 200 participants invited to the study, 120 responded. The respondents were Polish management students in the age range of 21–28. The selection of the research sample was purposeful since, according to Central Statistical Office [59], students represent almost 60% of young people in Poland, and management students are included in the second largest group of business and administration studies, that is, above 18% of all students. Business and management students have an important role in creating, influencing, and performing in the near future. These young people are going not only to work in business and administration but to be managers of national and international companies as well as of public administration units. They are going to have real impact on how the future world will look like because they will become decision makers.

The survey questionnaire included questions from the following subject areas:

- (1) The human–environment relationship;
- (2) The perception of threats and their sources;
- (3) The perception of environmental, social, and economic problems;
- (4) The prioritization of SDGs from their point of view.

The questionnaire was structured accordingly to posed research questions (Table 2).

Table 2. Research questions and the structure of the questionnaire content.

Research Question	Description	Examples of Questions in the Survey
How do young people perceive global environmental problems?	The perception of one’s environment awareness and human’s impact on its condition. Questions about the human–environment relationship and the perspective on its assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that you have influence for environmental protection? • Which of the following actions do you think will limit climate change? • How do you think the state of the environment affects your health? • Which dimension of environmental threats is more important to you (global vs. local; future vs. present)?
What do they do to impact and model their environment?	The aim was to learn about everyday actions and concessions that young people are ready to undertake in order to care about the environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please indicate which of the following actions you take to protect the environment. • What are you willing to give up to improve the quality of the environment?
How do they feel when faced with global multidimensional problems?	This part of the survey considered dealing with multidimensional problems on the emotional level of the respondents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of the following issues do you perceive as threats? • Which of the following issues do you most worry about?
How do young people prioritize multidimensional problems?	The purpose of this part was to obtain the picture of specific problems that young people value as most important in the context of environment, economy, and society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of the following environmental issues are most important to you? • Which of the following economic issues are most important to you? • Which of the following social issues are most important to you?
What do they expect to be ensured in the nearest future?	This part aimed to give respondents a chance to consider, assess, and get to know their expectations about what kind of global problems are the most pressing for them in the nearest future, based on issues already stated in SDGs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which of the following issues are the most pressing problems in your opinion?

The study included the assessment of many factors that make up the perception of quality of life and their connection with the assessment of the importance of individual environmental, economic, and social elements (Figure 1). The *environment* element includes the awareness of ecological threats and human impact on their occurrence. It also includes the declared individual actions of respondents that limit the negative impact on the environment. In the *various threats* section, the respondents were asked about their anxiety and sense of threat related, e.g., to diseases, including diseases of affluence, wars, economic problems, or climate change. The *society* factor includes best practices that are most important from the respondents’ point of view.

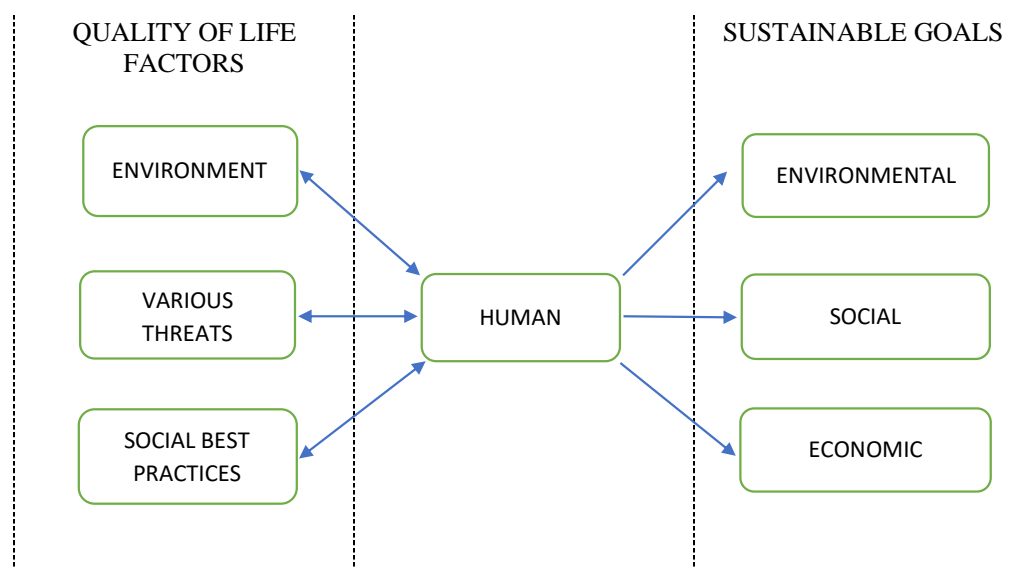


Figure 1. Diagram presenting the research problem.

5. Results

5.1. The Human–Environment Relationship

In the first part of the study, i.e., the assessment of ecological threats, almost 99% of respondents declared awareness of ecological threats, and 95% believed that it had an impact on environmental protection. Over 64.2% of respondents believed that the condition of the environment is related solely to human activity, while over 33.3% believed that the human impact on the environment is only partial (Figure 2). Only 2.5% of respondents believed that the condition of the environment is independent of human activity.

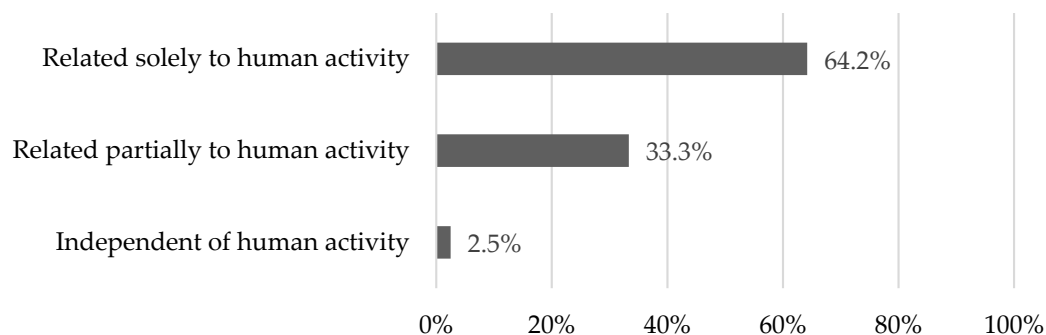


Figure 2. The causes of ecological threats, according to the respondents.

Respondents rated climate change as significantly above average (3.76/5) and indicated the reason for climate change. More than 52.5% of respondents believed that climate change is caused solely by human activity, and almost 45.8% indicated that this impact is only partial (Figure 3). On the other hand, the only 1.7% indicated that climate change is independent from human activity.

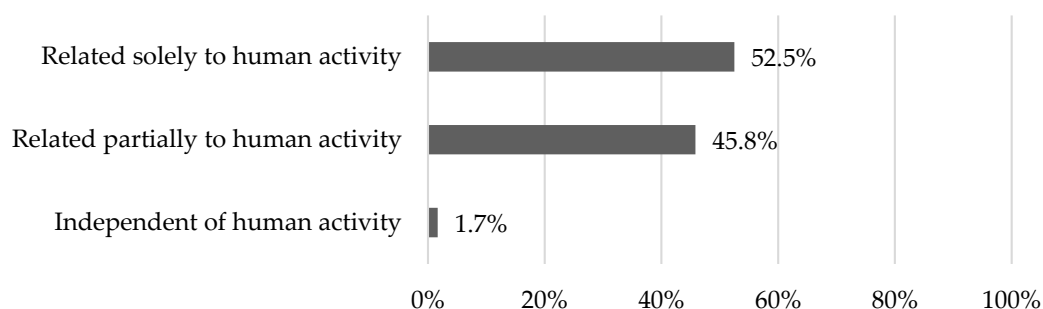


Figure 3. The causes of climate change according to the respondents.

According to the vast majority of respondents (94.2%), climate change will be curbed following the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (Figure 4). Subsequently, the abandonment of carbon fuels (70.8%) and the use of solar energy (65.8%) and wind energy (50%) were indicated.

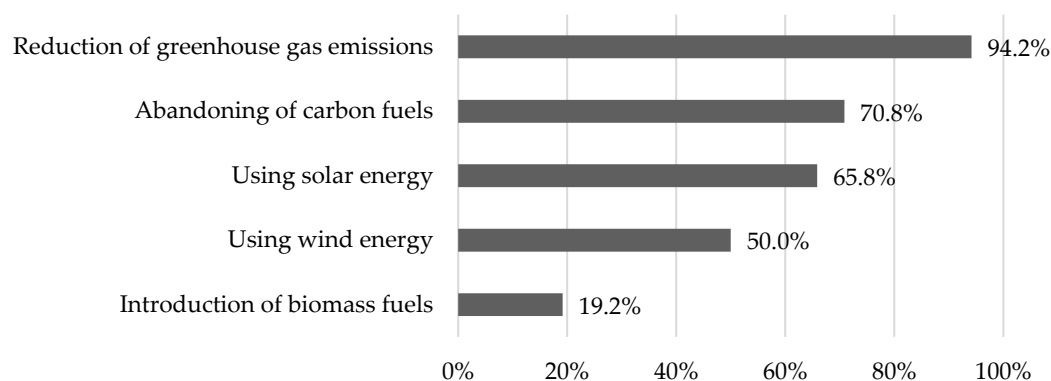


Figure 4. Actions that will reduce climate change, according to the respondents.

Then, the respondents were asked what they believe is the health impact of the condition of the environment. Over 66.7% of respondents believed that the condition of the environment has a negative impact on human health (Figure 5). The positive impact of the condition of the environment on human health was indicated by 18.3% of the respondents, and 15% said it was neutral.

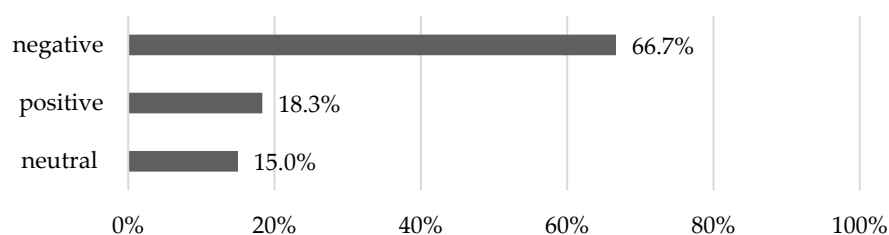


Figure 5. The influence of the condition of the environment on human health, according to the respondents.

Actions for the environment are known to be global, imposed by legal regulations. However, the local approach is also important, as the world consists of many local communities that can act jointly towards counteracting environmental threats. Therefore, the respondents were asked how they assessed the effectiveness of ecological activities globally, in the EU, in Poland, and in the region where they lived (Figure 6). Actions at each level were rated as poor or average; the highest rating was given to the actions of the European Union (2.94/5) and the worst for local ecological actions (2.27/5).

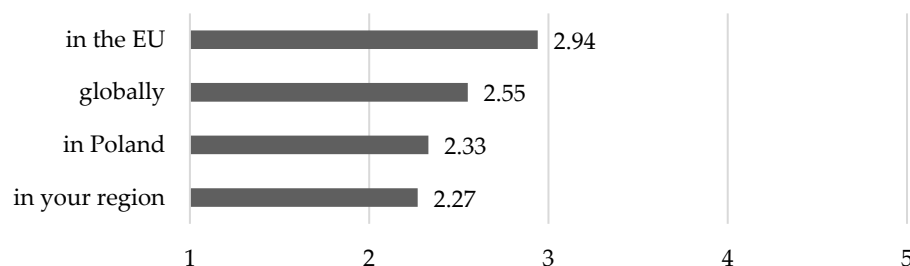


Figure 6. Assessment of the effectiveness of ecological activities according to the respondents (on a scale of 1 to 5, weighted arithmetic mean).

Simultaneously, research shows that for the respondents, the global dimension of ecological threats (64.2%) is more important than the local dimension (35.8%) (Figure 7).

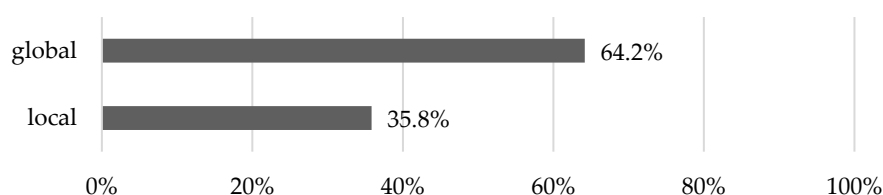


Figure 7. The hierarchy of importance of global vs. local ecological threats, according to the respondents.

Moreover young people are more focused on future environmental threats (58.3%) than on the present ones (41.7%) (Figure 8).

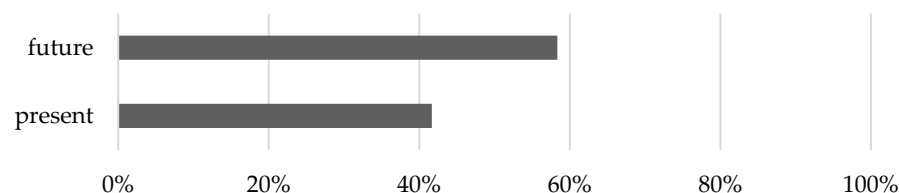


Figure 8. The hierarchy of importance of future vs. present ecological threats, according to the respondents.

Then, respondents were asked what actions they personally take to reduce own impact on environmental degradation (Figure 9.). The respondents most often indicated using reusable bags (90%) and sorting trash (85%). Moreover, most respondents indicated resource-saving activities: reducing energy consumption (approximately 72%), reducing water consumption (62.5%), and avoiding food waste (60.8%). The respondents were least likely to buy products in ecological packaging (39.2%), which is known to involve additional costs.

Based on the chi-square independence analyses for discrete qualitative data, it is clear that those respondents who believe that environment condition is solely dependent on human activity involve themselves in all the actions mentioned above (p -value < 0.001). At the same time, independence analyses showed that those respondents who believe that climate change is caused solely by human activity do significantly more to reduce electric energy consumption (χ^2 (2, n = 120) = 5.765, p = 0.056) and to recycle everyday objects (χ^2 (2, n = 120) = 8.779, p = 0.012) (Table 3). There was no significant relationship between other actions of respondents and the considered influence of human activity on the climate change.

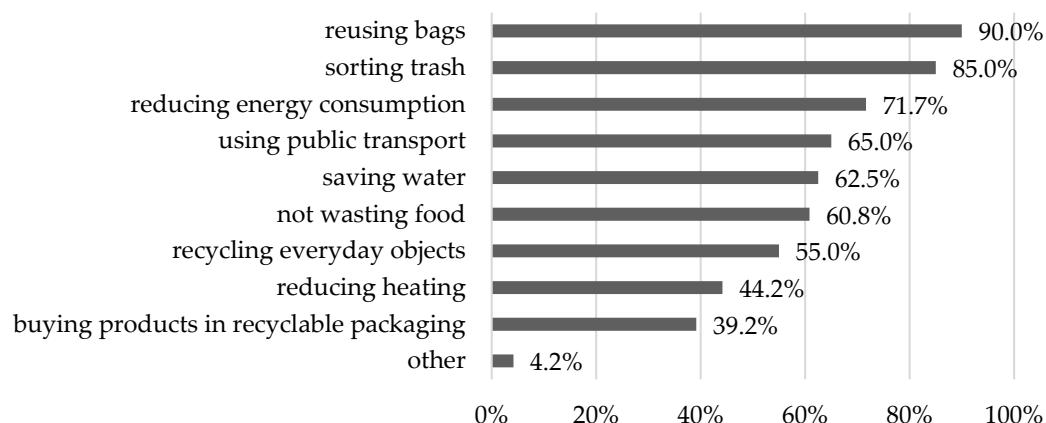


Figure 9. Pro-environmental actions of respondents.

Table 3. Test of independence of two chi-square variables.

The Causes of Climate Change According to the Respondents.	Pro-Environmental Actions of Respondents		Pearson's Chi-Square		
	Reducing Energy Consumption		Value	df	p-Value
	NO	YES			
Related solely to human activity	12	51	5.765	2	0.56
Related partially to human activity	21	34			
Independent of human activity	1	1			
	Recycling Everyday Objects		Pearson's Chi-Square		
	NO	YES	Value	df	p-value
Related solely to human activity	21	42	8.779	2	0.12
Related partially to human activity	31	24			
Independent of human activity	2	0			

Next, the respondents were asked what they were willing to give up to protect and improve quality of the environment. The vast majority of respondents were willing to give up plastic bags (94.2%), disposable packaging (80%), and charcoal grill (60.8%) (Figure 10). On the other hand, in the case of everyday-use objects and activities, much fewer respondents are willing to give up using them. These include the resignation from using multiple devices with similar functions (22.5%), consumption of animal products (16.7%), and driving a car (15%).

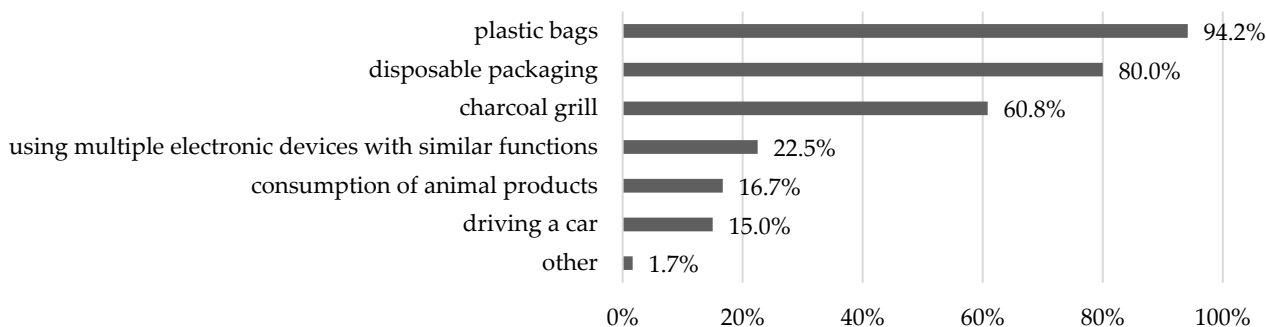


Figure 10. Readiness of personal concessions to protect and improve the quality of the environment.

The chi-square independence analyses for discrete qualitative data showed that those respondents who believe that the environment's condition is caused solely by human activity are significantly more willing to give up using plastic bags ($\chi^2 (3, n = 120) = 14.639, p = 0.002$) and disposable packaging ($\chi^2 (3, n = 120) = 8.023, p = 0.046$) (Table 4). There was no significant relationship between other concessions and the considered influence of human activity on the climate change.

Table 4. Test of independence of two chi-square variables.

The Causes of Environment Condition According to the Respondents	Concessions for the Environment		Pearson's Chi-Square		
	Plastic Bags		Value	df	p-Value
	NO	YES			
Related solely to human activity	4	73	14.639	3	0.002
Related partially to human activity	3	37			
Independent of human activity	0	2			
	Disposable Packaging		Pearson's Chi-Square		
	NO	YES	Value	df	p-value
Related solely to human activity	7	33	8.023	3	0.46
Related partially to human activity	31	24			
Independent of human activity	2	0			

5.2. Perception of Threats and Their Sources

In the second part of the survey, young people were asked about perceived threats, anxiety, and desired good social practices. Among the most significant contemporary threats, the respondents indicated military conflicts (79.2%) and environmental pollution (70.8%) (Figure 11). Please note that the research was conducted in January 2022, i.e., before Russia's attack on Ukraine. Significant threats also included diseases of affluence (59.25%) and deterioration of living conditions (53.2%). Although the research was conducted during the pandemic, this threat was indicated by approximately 34%. This indicates that young people do not perceive the pandemic as a threat to health and life but only as isolation and limitation of contacts in real reality.

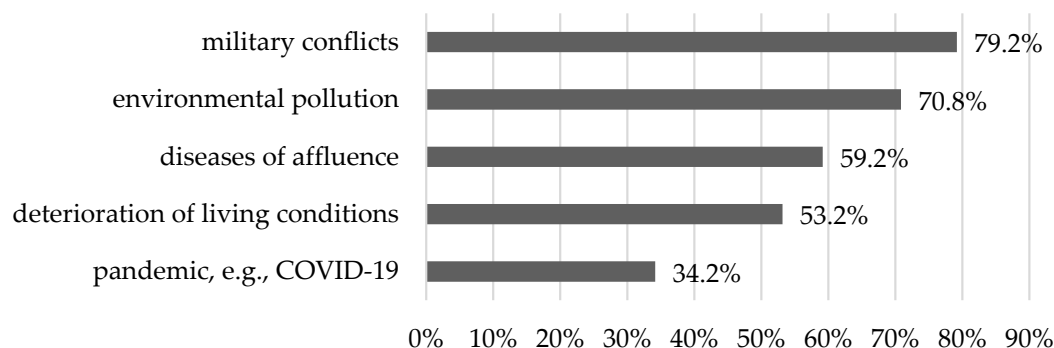


Figure 11. Hierarchy of threats, as seen by the respondents.

The greatest anxiety among the respondents is caused mainly by disease (4.3/5) (Figure 12). Subsequently, at a similar level, the respondents indicated poverty, smog, climate change, and unemployment. The least worrying is weather anomalies (3.32/5).

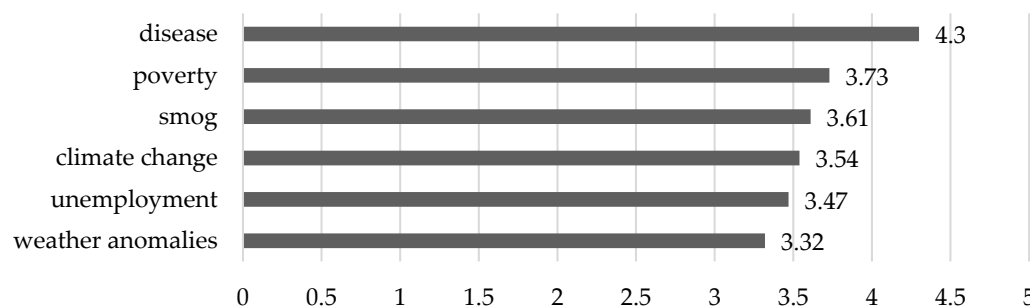


Figure 12. Anxiety-inducing phenomena, according to respondents (on a scale of 1 to 5).

Among the particularly important practices expected in society, the respondents included no discrimination (75.8%), respect for personal views (66.7%), and no mobbing (62.5%) (Figure 13). Twice less important were counteracting corruption, personal data protection, and fair competition.

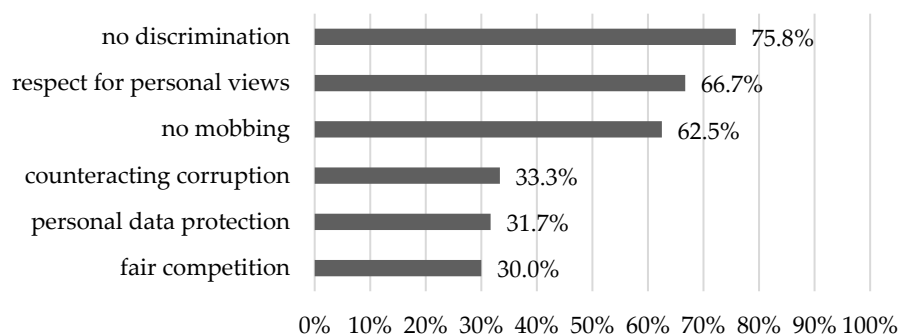


Figure 13. The hierarchy of importance of best social practices, according to the respondents.

5.3. The Perception of Environmental, Social, and Economic Problems

In the third part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to assess the significance of individual economic, environmental, and social problems. Among the most important economic issues, the respondents indicated fair remuneration (67.5%) and access to medical services (66.7%) (Figure 14). Over half of the respondents indicated work–life balance (55%). Almost half of the respondents indicated the importance of having a job (45%), which in turn is related to material security, indicated by 38.3%. For the respondents, quality of products (15.8%) as well as possession of material goods (9.2%) and their consumption (2.5%) are much less important.

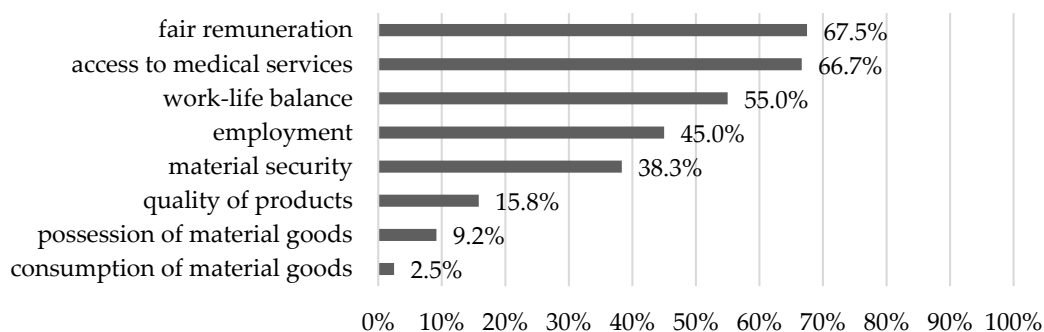


Figure 14. Hierarchy of priority among economic problems, according to the respondents.

On the other hand, among the social goals, human rights were considered the most important (83.3%) (Figure 15). Access to information (41.7%), working conditions (40.8%),

equal treatment of gender (38.3%), and reducing social inequalities (33.3%) are much less important for the respondents. Please note that the above areas should also be associated with human rights and not be treated separately. The least important goal indicated was care for stakeholders (12.5%). By including this goal, the respondents clearly indicated that each of them can be included in this group, but that they do not identify themselves with the stakeholder category. This could be due to a lack of social awareness or participation in social life.

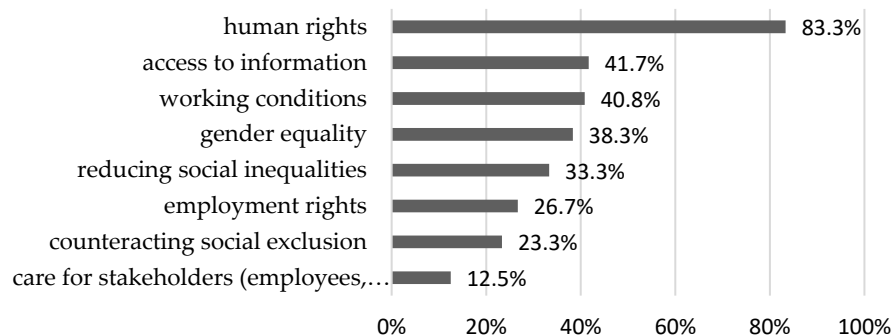


Figure 15. Hierarchy of priority among social goals, according to the respondents.

Among environmental goals, the reduction of smog in cities (73.3%) was considered the most important (Figure 16). Other important goals in this category include counteracting climate change (59.2%) as well as sorting and reducing trash (47.5%). Approximately 25.8% of respondents indicated the need to reduce the consumption of natural resources to protect biodiversity and to reduce water consumption. Although in previous studies, climate change was identified as an important environmental problem (Figure 6), approximately 18.3% of the respondents indicated a reduction of energy consumption, and the “greening” of products was indicated by 17.5% of respondents. Ecological transport was indicated by only 9.2% of the respondents.

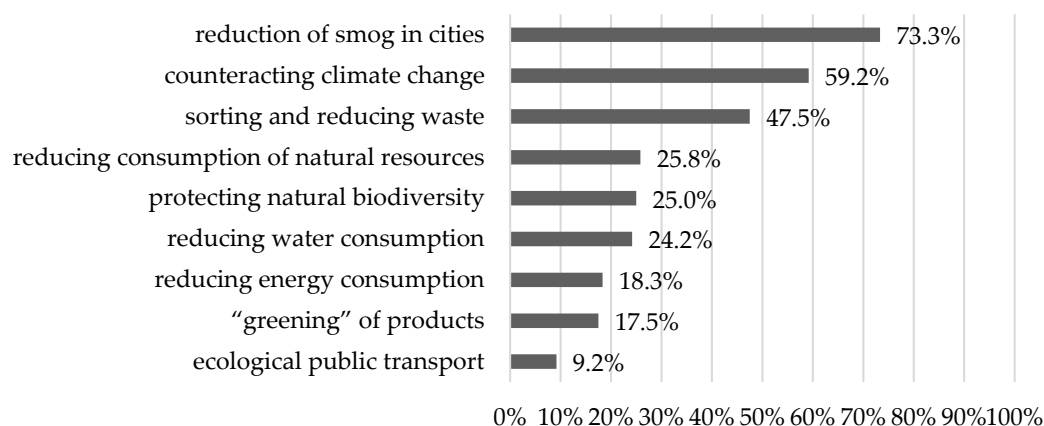


Figure 16. Hierarchy of importance of environmental goals, according to respondents.

In the summary of part 3 of the questionnaire, the respondents assessed the importance of all the goals from all areas. Then, the most important goals indicated by the respondents were health safety (88.3%), fair wages (80.0%), environmental protection (71.7%), and employment (64.2%) (Figure 17). The least important were reducing water and energy consumption, preserving biodiversity, public infrastructure, and reducing energy consumption. As we can see, when respondents prioritized problems of various sources, health safety came to the fore but also economic issues. Environmental protection was not lost either but was in the third place, ranked after the goals aimed at providing for needs that seem naturally more tangible.

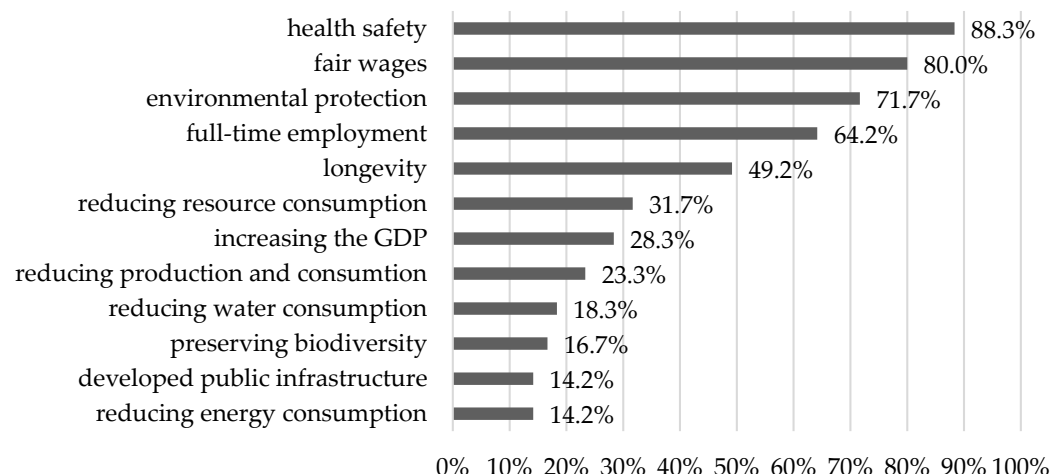


Figure 17. Hierarchy of importance of economic, environmental, and social goals, according to the respondents.

5.4. Assessment of Priorities in the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

In the last part of the survey, the surveyed group of respondents were presented with 17 SDGs, ordered in line with the 2030 Agenda, which they were supposed to organize by priority of implementation according to their own point of view (Figure 18). Based on cluster analyses of data, the responses were divided into four main groups in terms of the priority of actions for sustainable development.

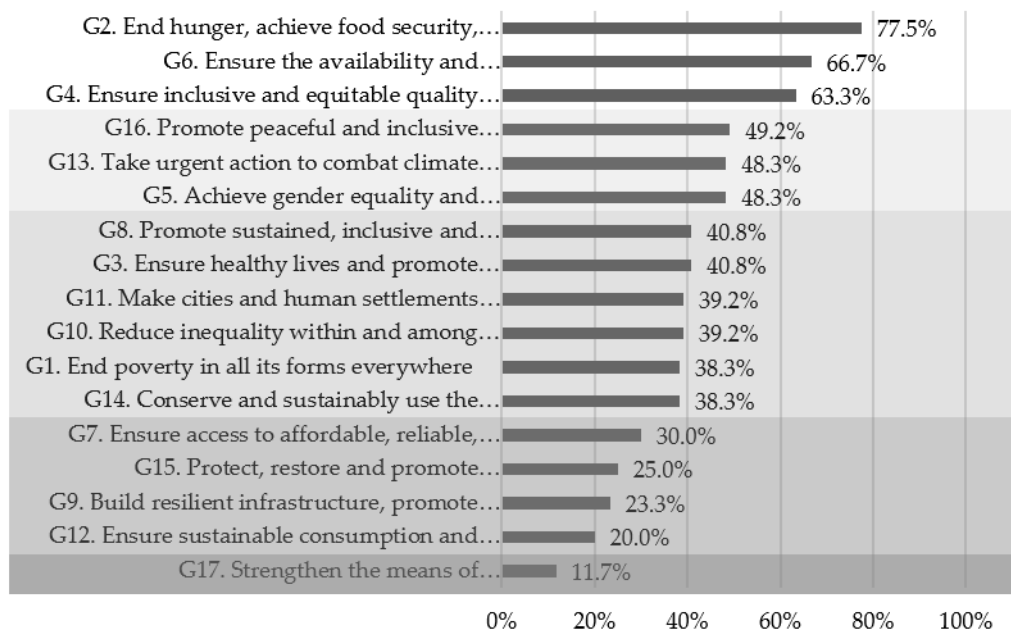


Figure 18. Hierarchy of sustainable development goals from the 2030 Agenda according to the respondents' implementation priority.

In the first group, the respondents indicated the three most important goals of sustainable development:

- Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (77.5%);
- Goal 6. Ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (66.7%);

- Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (63.3%).

In the second group, in terms of priorities, the respondents indicated:

- Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels (49.2%);
- Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (48.3%);
- Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empowerment of women and girls (48.3%).

In the third group, the respondents included:

- Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth; full and productive employment; and decent work for all (40.8%);
- Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (40.8%);
- Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (39.2%);
- Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries (39.2%);
- Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere (38.3%);
- Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development (38.3%).

The fourth group, with the lowest priority due to respondents, included:

- Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all (30%);
- Goal 15. Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems; sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss (25%);
- Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation (23.3%);
- Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (20%).

The least important goal (11.7%) from the respondents' point of view was Goal 17, i.e., Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

The presented order of the implementation of the SDGs points to the priority of goals related to basic human needs. Next come the goals related to security and equality, and only then come the perspective and development goals. Our result shows that there are four levels of priorities of sustainable development goals indicated by young people (Figure 19). The most important are basic human rights and needs: elimination of hunger and food as well as sanitary security. Next in line are the needs related to contemporary threats, such as the need for peace, stopping climate change, and achieving gender equality. Next in the hierarchy of needs are issues related to economic growth, equality between countries, and the eradication of poverty, followed by issues relating to health and welfare, local security, and the protection of the aquatic environment. The fourth group includes mainly issues related to the development and innovation in the field of energy and infrastructure. It also includes protection of ecosystems, soil degradation, and maintenance of biodiversity as well as the pursuit of sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Hunger, food security, good nutrition, sustainable agriculture	Peaceful and inclusive communities, access to justice, reliable institutions	Economic growth, full-time employment, decent pay	The cost of stable, sustainable and modern energy sources
Access to water, adequate, sanitary conditions	Climatic changes and their effects	Mental health and well-being	Patterns of consumption and production
Access to high-quality education	Gender equality, the position of women and girls	Physical and social security of cities and settlements	Stable infrastructure, sustainable industrialization, support for innovation
		Inequality within and among countries	Degradation of terrestrial ecosystems and forests, desertification, soil degradation, loss of biodiversity
		Poverty	
		Protection of the oceans, seas and marine resources	

Figure 19. Problems prioritized according to the assessment of the respondents. (In the 1. column are the most pressing problems, and in the 4 column are those perceived as less pressing.)

This can be compared to meeting the needs according to Maslow's hierarchy, which first lists the biological needs related to human existence, then the needs of security and social belonging, and then the needs of development and self-actualization [60].

6. Discussion

When analyzing the research results, it can be noticed that for young people, global threats are more important than local ones and future threats than present ones. Other studies showed that the mediating effect of future anxiety proves how perceived threat activates personal worries about one's future situation, leading to negative perceptions about future consequences [42]. This could be due to the fact that the perspective of the young generation is different. For them, global thinking is not a problem, and neither is working or living abroad. For young people, the future is more important than the present, which is understandable because their career and life decisions are related to the future. They take many actions to protect the environment: they decline disposable packaging, sort trash, and save energy. At the same time, one of the most important environmental goals of sustainable development is to reduce smog in cities and counteract climate change. Although climate change was recognized as the most important threat, and counteracting it as very important, transport was indicated as marginally important among the means of limiting climate change even though it accounts for 21% of global carbon emissions [61]. This indicates a superficial understanding of the problem of the source of ecological threats. In addition, note that the respondents found that limiting the consumption of natural resources, water, and energy and the protection of biodiversity were less important. This leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to educate and model the environmental awareness of the young generation.

Among the social issues, the most important are human rights, especially non-discrimination, respect for views, and no mobbing. The economic expectations include fair remuneration and access to medical services but also leisure time. Among the listed economic, environmental, and social SDGs, young people indicated health safety and fair pay as the most important. These were followed by environmental protection and full-time employment. Two of the issues most frequently mentioned were related to economic security, which is a natural prerequisite for their existence. This effect can be a resultant of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many studies show that the lockdown period was beneficial from an environmental perspective and raised more eco-awareness, unlike health and economic

issues, which were disrupted [62,63]. As a result, after two years of pandemic, countries and people are still economically struggling and healing.

At the same time, young people are aware that the condition of the environment has a negative impact on their health and that their greatest concern is disease, then poverty, and only then smog and climate change. The most significant threat identified by young people was armed conflicts. It was listed higher than environmental pollution although during the research period, the war in Ukraine seemed improbable. In the opinion of young people, diseases of affluence and deterioration of living conditions pose a greater threat than the pandemic although the research was conducted during its relative peak period. This confirms other research results, which indicated that the time of the pandemic was difficult for young people not because of fear for health and life but because of the lack of contacts in real reality [45]. As the recent research indicates, the circumstances surrounding the pandemic, such as social distancing, isolation, uncertainty, fear, etc., had large impact on increasing stress-related symptoms and affecting mental well-being [42,64,65]. On the other hand, among the 17 SDGs defined in the 2030 Agenda, goals that apply to all people around the world, such as eliminating hunger, access to drinking water, and ensuring education, were identified by respondents as most pressing. Above 60% of the respondents declared reducing food waste as a way of protecting environment. This shows the empathy and sensitivity of the young generation to other people in the global dimension as well as to the dangers and problems of hunger and social inequalities regardless of their country of origin. On the other hand, another study showed that despite the fact that many consumers seem to be aware of the dilemma of excessive food discarding in their households and recognizing their active role in preventing this socio-economic problem, the food waste is still very high [66].

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the need to rethink, revise, and modify the sustainable development goals since changes have never been so unpredictable in terms of future events. Those young people who were born between 1994 and 2001 and who are young adults already present in labor market or who are just stepping in are the part of generation Z [67]. This younger generation is described as the driving force for achieving the SDGs because they already have a higher pro-sustainable lifestyle than the older generations, and their raising awareness would increase support for SDGs implementation and push society forward to increase lifestyle sustainability [68]. Learning about the younger generation's awareness of environmental problems and approach to the sustainable development goals has made it possible to extract priorities in this regard. The target group represented management students, who are not only young adult citizens but also future managers of national and international companies as well as public administration units.

All current actions in the area of environment, economy, and society will influence the whole life of young people but at the same time, they have to learn to not only be aware of these problems but to be actively included and participate in the setting of local and global goals and their realization because they are future decision makers. As Fabbrizzi et al. [69] showed, education should supply younger generations with management capabilities and collaborative methods to develop the decision-making skills for assessing sustainability criteria. Moreover, education should involve coordination with governmental and economic activities that create opportunities for individual actions of young people [70].

7. Conclusions

Environmental pollution affects not only material but also psychological well-being. As observed, we live not only under direct influence of various harmful factors but also in awareness of the dangers that could occur in the future, which are related to the influence of physiochemical and microbiological factors on the human body. Even if the direct effects of this influence are not noticed in good health, nevertheless, we live under the pressure of what could be. For example, diseases of affluence pose a potential threat to healthy people, which is indicated by the concerns of young people. The awareness of these threats is justified and falls under preventive and social actions. The young generation is aware

of environmental threats and the need to protect the environment. However, they do not identify sources of pollution and do not realize the need to conserve resources, energy, and water. Therefore, it is necessary to educate them about the environment and its resources and to continuously model environmental awareness.

The SDGs defined in the 2030 Agenda are formulated in quite general terms. On the one hand, one cannot question them, but on the other hand, it is difficult to identify with them. Therefore, young people do not feel included in their implementation. The results of the research indicate that the SDGs should be revised and redefined to improve actions in terms of priority related to the safety of life and human development. It is recommended to include many social groups not only in defining SDGs but also in designing programs for their implementation. The research showed that not all goals are equally important and allowed for distinguishing four groups of goals according to the hierarchy of needs. Evidently, the goals indicated as top-ranking relate to basic and contemporary problems. At the same time, the goals related to the future development of infrastructure and global partnership were dismissed. In addition, the research showed that for young people, the goals with the greatest priority were formulated in a more specific and practical way. The more general and lofty nature of the goal, the lower was its utilitarian value. The surveyed young people are ecologically aware and willing to act towards environmental protection. All the more, the formulated goals should encourage them to participate in the implementation of sustainable development and build the future of our planet.

However, the presented results relate to specific group of young adults. The respondents were students of management. It is noteworthy to ask is the question: how may results differ among other fields of studies more or less related to sustainable development topic? Moreover, some of the indications can be culturally conditioned, and the priorities can differ depending on the origin of the survey taker. Therefore, in the future, it is worth revising the approach to the discussed topics among young adults from different countries. Furthermore, taking into consideration latest dramatic events and still ongoing war in Ukraine, some of the questions can elicit different answers, as our perception is strongly dependent on perspective caused by difficult situations and crises, for instance. Without question, we live in the rapidly changing and challenging world; therefore, answers to questions about environmental and certainly economic and social problems need to be regularly updated.

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Ethics Statement: Our research method belongs to non-interventional studies-survey, conducted within CAWI method (Computer Assisted Web Interview). All participants were fully informed about the anonymity that was assured, purpose of the research, and how their data will be used. Only adults participated in the recruitment to the survey study. Participation in the survey was voluntary and before starting respondents were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time without providing any justification. All participants obtained a detailed description of the survey and that questions will concern only their opinion on a given topic. Each participant also consented to the processing of their personal data in accordance with Article 6 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons regarding the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation). All research procedures were in line with the Code of Good Practices in Universities elaborated by the Polish Rectors Foundation and adopted by the Plenary Assembly of the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (CRASP) on 26 April 2007 and with the ethical standards of the Cracow University of Economics adopted by the resolution of its Senate (No. 38/2011).

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