

**Publisher**<http://jssidoi.org/esc/home>

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION IN SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS – A PERSPECTIVE OF SLOVAK MAYORS*

Eliška Čičmancová ^{1*}, Jakub Soviar ²

^{1*,2} Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, University of Žilina, Žilina, Slovakia

E-mails: ^{1*} eliska.cicmancova@fri.uniza.sk (Corresponding author); ² jakub.soviar@fri.uniza.sk

Received May 11 2024; accepted July 27 2024; published September 30 2024

Abstract. With the release of the 2030 Agenda, sustainability is becoming a progressively more debated topic in public life. Municipalities expected to develop sustainably in line with the Sustainable Development Goals are no exception. The essence of implementing sustainability in municipal management is the knowledge of this concept and, above all, the will to continue to learn and improve. The carriers of this will are mainly mayors and other local government leaders who can influence the perception of sustainability issues in local government and encourage municipal staff to further their education. Our research focused on Slovak local governments of different sizes and conducted structured electronic interviews with 21 of their representatives. Based on our theoretical findings, we established one hypothesis closely linked to the five research questions. The main finding is that mayors are interested in sustainability issues and want to consider them in their governance. However, they feel only moderately informed, perceiving a need for more interest in these topics, especially from the state.

Keywords: local governments, sustainability, sustainable management of local governments, mayors, perspectives on sustainability information

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Čičmancová, E., Soviar, J. 2024. Leadership and communication in sustainable management of local governments – a perspective of Slovak mayors. *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues*, 12(1), 223-239. [http://doi.org/10.9770/jesi.2024.12.1\(16\)](http://doi.org/10.9770/jesi.2024.12.1(16))

JEL Classifications: D83, H70, M10

1. Introduction

As the world's crises grow in importance, so does the need to behave more sustainably. A sustainable environment is most often associated with ecological approaches and nature conservation. The term 'sustainability' is also used in other areas. These are more precisely described in the 2030 Agenda, a set of global commitments to respond to today's global challenges. The agenda also identifies all issues as interlinked and, therefore, need to be addressed together, rather than separately and in isolation, which could lose effectiveness. The 2030 Agenda concerns everyone (countries, local governments, individuals) and includes the following 17 goals (MoE SR, 2019):

- No poverty
- No hunger
- Quality of health and life
- Quality education
- Gender equality
- Clean water and sanitation
- Affordable and clean energy
- Decent work and economic growth

* This research was funded by the Slovak Republic scientific grant APVV-20-0481

- Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- Reducing inequalities
- Sustainable cities and communities
- Responsible consumption and production
- Climate protection
- Living under water
- Life on land
- Peace, justice and strong institutions
- Partnerships for the Goals

Even though this concept is most often associated with ecology and purchasing behaviour, it also affects local governments (mainly the goal of Sustainable cities and communities). According to Eurostat (2024), there is progress in achieving SDGs in Slovakia and the EU, too. As the smallest local government units, municipalities, in particular, can act as exemplary organizations sustainably. Moreover, the findings show that municipalities have high credibility among citizens (SITA, 2021) and can thus be initiators of sustainability communication. We understand this concept from three perspectives - economic, ecological, and social - and together, we form a sustainable development system. Recent findings show that one pillar can only function with the other, and the system can only be fully sustainable if sustainability is achieved in each pillar. It is, therefore, important for local governments to be exemplary public officials who can stimulate interest in this issue among citizens and strengthen the motivation to improve the situation in Slovak regions.

Local governments play a crucial role in giving information to citizens (Čičmancová, 2022; Shava, Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). In all of its forms, communication in local government should be considered in the strategies and be a priority for the representative person (Svirak, Kwarteng & Pilík, 2023).

The mayors need to be active in the process of communication and try to involve citizens as much as possible so that they feel heard. However, the sustainability problems in local governments still have to be covered in the academic literature. More specialized research is needed to fill the research gap.

2. Theoretical background

Attention to self-governing units in Slovakia is found in the first half of the 13th century. In those times, some towns had the privilege to elect their representatives to their executive bodies. Regional territories with their administration began to emerge in the Middle Ages. In the course of history, the territorial administration in the Slovak territory changed several times until it reached its present form (Nižňanský, 2002). The Government of the Slovak Republic approved the concept of decentralization in April 2000; thus, a second level of self-government was created, and a higher territorial unit was added to the municipal system. It is important to note that it was stipulated that there should be no relationship of superiority and inferiority between the city authorities and the local government bodies of the higher self-government units; both levels have clearly defined roles, competencies, powers or responsibilities towards the citizens. In the same way, the state and local governments are supposed to represent a cooperation relationship, and the state only supervises local governments in terms of laws (Nižňanský, 2002).

Local governments in Slovakia are established according to Act No.369/1990 Coll. on Municipal Establishment and Act No.302/2001 Coll. on Self-Government of Higher Territorial Units (Act on Self-Governing Regions). All the main definitions and principles of management, whether of a municipality or a self-governing region, are subject to these two Acts.

Mederly et al. (2017) state that a municipality is "a self-governing unit exercising a part of public authority". Although the municipality acts as the universal administrator of the territory, not all parts of the administration in a given territory fall under its competence. Nižňanský (2002) argues that municipal or local government does not act on behalf of the state but on behalf of the citizens. Thus, local government is relatively independent from the state administration.

Local governments belong by nature to the public sector, which, together with the private sector, forms the mixed economy of the state (Jankelová et al., 2018). Rektorík defines the public sector as "the part of the national economy in which public services are performed in the public interest, is financed predominantly from public budgets, is governed and administered by the public administration, is the subject of public decision-making

and is subject to public control" (Rektořík, 2007). Thus, it is essential to note that the public sector in the conditions of the Slovak Republic may differ from the public sectors of other countries, as it also reflects the culture of a given country, the political situation or legislative statutes.

Another difference between the public and private sectors is the nature of public services provided by local governments. Local governments are tasked with providing a wide range of public services that affect residents' daily lives. These services range from basic infrastructure and social services to cultural and recreational activities.

The public sector, and therefore local authorities, have a significant role to play in the field of communication. Communication between local government and citizens is a vital tool for informing them about local government services, projects and plans. It also allows citizens to express their needs, comments and expectations. Consistent and transparent communication builds public confidence in local authorities and their decisions.

Pavlik (2014) recommends using the PDCA cycle in municipal management, which mainly aims to improve processes continuously. This cycle can help mayors better plan their activities and achieve sustainability in the management sooner. Its main components - Plan - Do - Check - Act - run in a continuous cycle, and the process can thus be improved and improve its quality. This system is mainly applicable in local governments in providing services to citizens, where we can include all routine acts in contact with the citizens in the municipal office. The different steps of PDCA are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Steps of the PDCA cycle

Section	Activities
PLAN	Defining the context of the organization Defining the vision, goal and objectives Defining the organization's processes, their inputs and outputs Defining responsibilities Defining the need for documentation Describing the limitations, risks and activities in the processes Defining the means of monitoring and measuring results
DO	Implementation of activities, monitoring and control Defining the necessary resources
CHECK	Verifying the process and comparing it with the plan
ACT	Bringing change The process of improvement

Source: STN ISO norm 9001:2015

According to Epstein (2014), sustainable management is to be based mainly on the strong leadership of the manager. Leadership is part of the processes necessary for governance, along with a clearly defined sustainability strategy, a sustainability structure, and defined sustainability systems, programs, and actions. However, to ensure processes are in place, it is necessary to understand the external context of the organization (or local government), its internal and organizational context, and its human and financial resources. These components represent inputs to the processes. The outputs are then the sustainability performance, particularly the social impact, together with stakeholder reactions, which can be reflected in the financial implications of sustainable management. All outputs combine to form the primary outcome, which is the long-term financial performance of the organization (or local government). Again, this shows a concentric understanding of sustainability, in which the last and most nested component is economic sustainability, which can be achieved by adequately grasping the other two components of sustainable development. The leaders in local government can perceive a higher level of economic and financial sustainability of the local government when collaborating with different stakeholders (Kim, 2018). These can be neighbouring municipalities and their representatives or active citizens.

The leadership in the local government can transform into digital leadership when using modern methods coming with the digital transformation of today's world (Branderhorst & Ruijter, 2024). However, the mayors or other managers in municipalities need to be informed about various management methods and communication with citizens. Also, continuing education is required to strengthen the knowledge of these methods. The lack of such information can be addressed by improving the systems for communication in the municipal office, mainly by organizing the responsibilities and competencies of each employee (Holubčík et al., 2024). Big data solutions are advised when working with a lot of information in a local government (Andrews, 2018; Koman et al., 2019). Larger municipalities can even use sustainability performance systems to address the problems, help organize the work in the municipal office, and plan strategies according to the sustainability development goals (Deslatte & Stokan, 2020).

Even though the approach to sustainable management can vary from person to person, their political preferences do not play a vital role, especially in local governments (Bisogno et al., 2023). Sustainability may also be connected to ethics, and some authors advise that the mayors or other representatives, including the employees of the municipal office, undergo some ethical training to achieve more ethical and moral decision-making in the municipality (El Haber & Nagpal, 2023). The mayor and their strong leadership can also determine whether the working environment is balanced and non-discriminative. In local governments, female employees may be overlooked and need to achieve higher management positions (Hutchinson et al., 2014).

Wang, Wart and Lebrede (2014) argue that the most critical communication carrier is the local government representative. Therefore, they emphasize good leadership, which, according to the authors, can achieve a higher level of communication and actual management in local government. It also describes two different approaches to improving sustainability. The first is bottom-up communication, which actively involves local government residents in planning and deploying sustainable activities, emphasizing the importance of citizen support throughout the process. The second approach described is top-down communication, i.e. it uses professional expertise to support decision-making regarding sustainability.

Communication can occur at different levels and in various forms in an organization. Based on the nature and number of actors involved in communication, three main types of communication can be described, namely intrapersonal, interpersonal and mass communication. These are described in more detail in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Types of communication and their use in local government

Type of communication	Meaning	Character	Use in local government
Intrapersonal	It takes place in the inner psychological environment of the individual, the inner conversation.	It is part of every communication process, The essence is knowledge about oneself, All the thought processes associated with the functions of management take place within it, Important for management in terms of developing strategies and tactics, The output is preparation for other types of communication.	Reflection of the managing person Preparation for business and municipal council meetings
Interpersonal	The process of exchanging information between the originator and the recipient of a message.	A complex and multifaceted process, It is ongoing in the organization, It is a product of social-psychological and interpersonal relationships or organizational structure, It takes place within or between levels of management, It is applied in the allocation of tasks, evaluation, control, motivation, release of employees, in the areas of personnel management and other managerial functions, It involves managerial communication, Empathy, assertiveness are applied,	Between the managing person and the employees or the members of municipal council Personal interviews with citizens Visits

Mass	It disseminates information to a large group of people through mass communication tools.	It allows the transfer of information in a large number of identical copies to an anonymous mass of recipients, Information is communicated to a large and diverse audience, Sender and recipient are not in direct, immediate contact, It has a plural and public character, Its main functions are democratizing, socializing, rationalizing, informative, informative, cognitive, promotional, educational, ethical-aesthetic, The process follows specific rules, This includes internet communication.	Disseminating information to all citizens Social networks Municipal Radio Official and information boards Website Municipal events
------	--	--	---

Source: Szarková, 2011 and own elaboration

The efforts to improve communication with inhabitants should involve the local government strategies and internal processes, with the mayor or other representative responsible (Abhayawansa et al., 2021). Especially since addressing this topic to the public is complex (Demjanovičová & Varmus, 2021).

For this research, we understand and define the terms used as indicated in Table 3 based on previous research, experience, and information gained.

Table 3. Understanding and definitions of used terms

Term	Definition
Sustainability	A concept of three pillars, economic, environmental and social, aiming to maintain or improve the status quo with the help of available resources, not restraining future generations.
Sustainable management	The approach to management considers the principles of sustainability and sustainable development.
Sustainable management of a local government	The approach to management mainly applied to local governments, is slightly different from the management of a business with a need to understand and plan regular communication with citizens. An important aspect is strong leadership.

Source: Own elaboration

Based on the theoretical information, the research gap still exists, mainly in terms of the managerial perspective on this topic. More research was needed to cover the views and opinions of mayors of local governments, especially the smaller ones, on their approach to education, leadership and relationships with citizens.

3. Research objective and methodology

This article aims to present the perspective of mayors of Slovak municipalities and their approach to the management of communication and sustainability in the municipality. In our research, we focus on how the representatives of Slovak local governments (mainly smaller ones) approach management in terms of their leadership and communication and whether and how they gain information on sustainability. The focus is also on involving citizens in the management process, thus creating a sustainable environment in the local government. We worked with one hypothesis based on five research questions.

H: If mayors are knowledgeable about sustainability, they consider this information in their management approach.

The theoretical findings suggest that an essential element in the sustainability of local government is leadership, which is exercised by the person in charge, i.e. the mayor(s) or mayoress(es). We assume that an informed manager makes more thoughtful decisions and thus applies knowledge directly to governance.

RQ₁ How do municipalities enable citizens to engage in governance?

The main objective is to determine whether and how the municipality seeks to actively involve citizens in governance and consequently improve citizens' quality of life in various aspects. We assess not only the level of public involvement in governance and how citizens perceive it but also factors such as the use of digital services or the overall willingness to adapt to citizens' needs.

RQ₂ How do those in charge approach the needs of citizens?

The research question is based on several indicators and focuses on whether municipal leaders respond in any way to the expressed needs of their citizens. Thus, various indicators are evaluated, exploring perspectives on measuring needs and their recognition or opportunities for public involvement in municipal governance. It also partially relies on identifying problems and needs, as these can often be based on citizen demands. The interest of citizens in what is happening in the municipality may also be decisive, which is necessary for sustainable governance, as this is the only way for citizens to express their needs.

RQ₃ How do managers support staff training and professional development?

The third research question seeks to answer whether education or training is carried out regularly and systematically in municipal offices and whether the persons in charge thoroughly support it. The aim is to determine whether higher and more regular continuing education can support sustainability work in municipal governance or raise awareness. We assume that with higher and more intensive training, a higher likelihood is present that employees will have better and more precise information about sustainability.

RQ₄ Can managers identify what influences the management of local government?

The question aims to determine whether local governments are likely to become more sustainable just by clearly understanding these impacts. In addition to the effects, this research question also measures whether those in charge are willing to carry out trust measurements of citizens and employees, which can clearly impact governance.

RQ₅ What information do local government managers have on sustainability?

The research question closely relates to how prepared municipalities are for sustainable management. It aims to discover what municipalities know about sustainability and whether they can translate it into management. Evaluated indicators measure knowledge of the pillars of sustainable development, expectations from sustainable management, and knowledge of its benefits, as well as general work with and understanding of sustainability in the municipality.

All respondents received the same set of questions to make it easier to evaluate their responses statistically:

- Law 17/1992 defines the concept of sustainable development in Section 6 as follows: "Sustainable development of society is such development which maintains the possibility for present and future generations to satisfy their basic needs of life, while not reducing the diversity of nature and preserving the natural functions of ecosystems." Have you come across sustainable development or sustainability as such in practice in any way? Do you work with it in community management?
- Do you expect to improve the situation in the municipality if you start working more on sustainability, or is this topic not a priority for you?
- Are the manager and the municipality/office staff sufficiently informed about the benefits of sustainable management in the municipality? Where do you get such information from?
- Do you identify the most significant impacts on governance (management) in the municipality? If so, how and what are they, and where do they operate? Please give an example.
- Do you support your training as a manager and the municipality/office staff? If yes, in what ways?
- Do you undertake opinion polls of citizens in any way? For example, measuring trust in the municipality or you as a manager by municipal/office staff and citizens, measuring satisfaction with life in the municipality, etc. If yes, what kind, how, and how often will it be?
- How can your citizens participate in governance and have their needs heard?

We looked for evidence in the responses that could be used to measure the indicators, and we later coded these responses according to pre-specified values from 0 to 5. These values were then statistically evaluated and compared to describe the general situation in these surveyed communities. Thus, in addition to the quantitative output, a qualitative output is also present, with specific responses from the respondents.

During February 2024, 117 requests to participate in the research were sent out via e-mail. The sample consisted of all municipalities from the districts of Prievidza, Bytča and Žilina, including towns. Out of the 117 messages, two could not be received due to the non-functioning of the mailbox. The municipalities did not have another e-mail address on their website, so the request was not resent. Of the remaining 115 requests, two municipal representatives apologized for not participating in the research due to workload. There were 21 positive responses, with the highest representation of municipalities from the Prievidza district (18 municipalities). 2 municipalities (including 1 town) from the Žilina district and 1 municipality from the Bytča district participated.

Participating local government leaders responded by return e-mail, and these responses were collected on March 10, 2024. Given the work responsibilities of the directors, there was an assumption that if they did not respond within 15 working days (3 weeks), the likelihood of a further response would decrease (e.g., also due to the receipt of new e-mails in their inboxes). We decided only to contact the municipalities that responded again.

Responses from the mayors were mainly brief but informative. Given the diversity of responses and the different communication styles of the respondents, we transcribed each interview, emphasizing the essential parts of the answers to the questions, following the interview scoring procedure of Hendl and Remr (2017):

- When transcribing the interviews, only the most important findings for each question were recorded for each respondent.
- The findings were categorized into lists with similar themes, thus simplifying the evaluation through descriptive statistics.
- Only then were codes assigned to the responses.

Due to the variety of responses and the number of responses, it was only possible to code some immediately, primarily for work purposes. In the paper, the results are described verbally with support in the form of graphs and tables.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results from the interviews

Working with sustainability in municipal governance

To avoid misunderstandings or different interpretations of the term sustainability, the term was described in the introduction to the interviews. Seventeen local government representatives said they regularly encounter sustainability and sustainable development goals (SDGs) in their management. Most who do not experience this issue are local government leaders with a population of less than 1,000. A paradoxical finding was that even the representative of the largest rural municipality involved needed to record regular encounters with this concept in governance. However, he stated that actions in line with SDGs are being taken in the municipality (Figure 1).

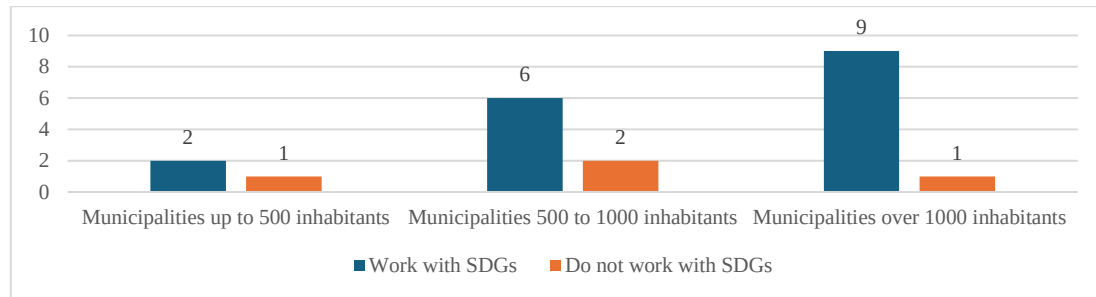


Figure 1. Work with SDGs in municipalities

Municipalities that regularly deal with this issue said they most often understand it in ecological terms. They mainly take measures that contribute to improving the environment. Representatives described working with solutions that support ecosystems, for example:

- Energy efficiency in buildings,
- Use of photovoltaics,
- Water conservation measures,
- Construction of composting sites,
- Promoting waste management and preventing black dumps,
- Environmental protection and education.

Municipal representatives also emphasized the social understanding of sustainability, mainly by supporting employment in municipalities, educating and informing citizens, promoting rental housing and providing social services.

Of all the mayors interviewed, only 5 explicitly stated that they understood sustainability in the municipality, mainly economically. In this regard, they are taking steps to promote a healthy economy in the municipality:

- Strategic Financial Planning,
- Adherence to strategies, especially the own strategic documents and Agenda 2030,
- Provision of financial contributions for civic projects,
- Use of state and EU subsidies.

A crucial positive finding for this research was that municipalities consider it essential to inform and educate citizens about sustainability. By linking this with the content analysis of the websites and strategic documents, we found that those municipalities that participated in the interviews do indeed inform about the facts mentioned above on their websites.

Expectations for improvement in the municipality when working with sustainability

The second question in the interviews touched on expectations when working with sustainability. Those representatives who do not regularly engage with the SDGs stated that the topic is not a priority for them, and thus, they have no expectations. In the case of the municipality involved, which has over 2,000 inhabitants, the representative expects to improve the situation in the municipality, even if the topic of TUR needs to be actively addressed at the moment and the agenda is only in the planning process. In the case of the municipalities already working with sustainability, they have only noticed a positive impact, an improvement in the condition of the municipality and an increase in the satisfaction of the citizens.

On this issue, some representatives expressed that the barrier to more sustainable governance is finance and the need for more capacity for community development. Mayors feel overwhelmed by other responsibilities; thus, there is no space left for planning with sustainability in the village environment.

However, the essential finding remains that municipal leaders are interested in working with sustainability if the abovementioned barriers are removed. Municipalities also rely on funding and subsidies from the state or the EU.

Awareness of the benefits of sustainable management

In the interviews, we also explored subjective feelings of awareness of sustainability issues. Of the 21 representatives, up to 9 said they needed to be more sufficiently informed and felt a strong need for increased awareness and support from the state. In the interviews, the directors stated that information on sustainable management does not come to the municipalities systematically but sporadically, and they do not see any structured information network for this type of information. As sources of information, representatives most frequently mentioned:

- Internet and self-initiated search,
- Generative information exchange in management,
- Association of Towns and Municipalities of Slovakia,
- District Environmental Offices,
- Media,
- Practice of other municipalities in Slovakia and the Czech Republic,
- Available training and seminars.

Figure 2 below shows the level of awareness of sustainable management by municipality size. Awareness is balanced in both size groups of participating municipalities. An important observation is that up to 52% of the representatives reported that their understanding of sustainable management and its benefits needs to be at a sufficient level to be able to implement this knowledge in their management.

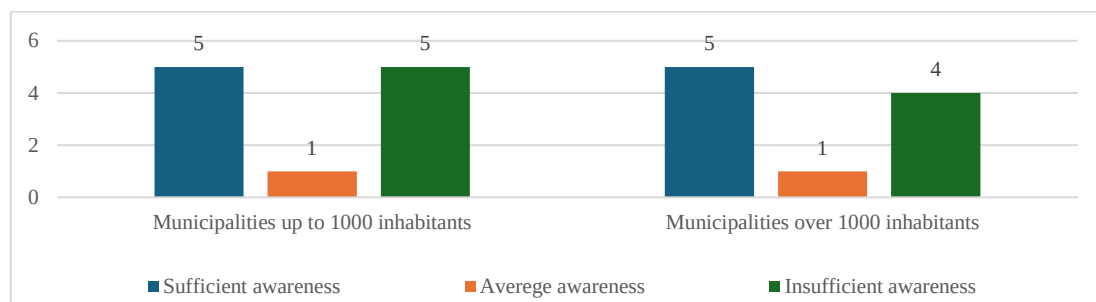


Figure 2. Perception of awareness of sustainable local government management

The interviews also revealed a perceived need for more state engagement in information transfer to local governments. Managers often need more space to promote sustainability awareness, especially if they do not consider it a priority. In the Slovak local government environment, it is still seen as a supplementary agenda rather than a primary one.

Identification of impacts on management

Citizen satisfaction was the most recurrent response to the question of impacts on governance. Governors stressed that it is essential that citizens feel safe and happy in the municipality and are interested in the functioning of the municipality. Other management decisions are often based on this factor, and objectives are adapted. Where municipalities do not identify any influences on governance, they follow standard regulations and their discretion. In addition, municipalities identify the following significant impacts:

- Laws, regulations,
- Government and political situation in Slovakia,
- Involvement of the professional public,
- Environmental protection and compliance,
- Finances and how to redistribute them,
- Constructive suggestions from citizens,
- Civic associations, NGOs and interest groups,
- Lack of skilled workers in the labour market, lack of experience of municipal employees.

Regarding staff, managers further commented on the importance of improving the working environment, communicating with staff and sensitizing them to the challenges and changes in the municipal offices. Employee satisfaction was thus also one, albeit less pronounced, element influencing the municipality's management.

Support for management and staff education

The working environment in municipal offices was also touched upon in the fourth question in the interviews. The aim was to determine how managers approach further training and staff development. A positive finding was that all the municipal government leaders interviewed had a positive attitude towards training. Only the forms in which this training is provided differed. An overview of the most common ones is shown in Figure 3.

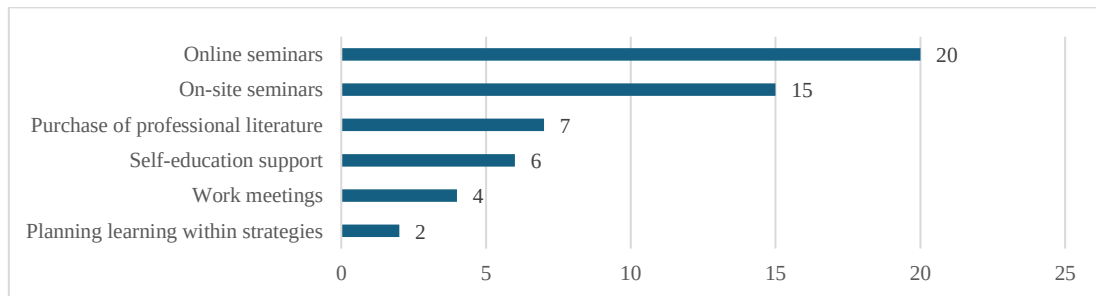


Figure 3. Most used methods of staff learning in municipalities

Most representatives support a form of online employee training. They appreciate the ease of access and conducting the learning process on-site at the workplace. Slightly less popular are face-to-face seminars, which often require municipalities to allocate more funding and are more time-consuming. Seven municipalities also make purchases of literature and subsequently support staff in the self-learning process. Four municipalities consider workshops as a tool for staff training. Two municipalities stated that they plan staff training in their strategies and have funds allocated for these activities in advance.

A recurring theme in the responses was the interest in training and seminars organized by third parties. In the Prievidza district, it was mainly the Regional Training Centre of Nitra Municipality (RVC Nitra), an association of municipalities that regularly organizes training activities for municipal representatives and employees. This centre belongs to the Association of Local Government Education (AVS), which, in addition to the RVC Nitra, also has associations in the municipalities of Martin, Rovinka, Senica, Trenčín and Trnava (AVS, 2024). In addition to organizing seminars and training courses, AVS is also involved in preparing and distributing literature for the further education of employees in local government.

Other external organizations mentioned included universities and training academies, but also associations of municipalities. For example, the Association of Towns and Municipalities of Slovakia, representatives of which are also mentioned as a source of information on sustainability, and the Association of Towns and Municipalities of Upper Nitra. In this respect, municipalities consider cooperation with other cities or third parties as key to sustainability, as they are often essential in obtaining information and education.

Conducting opinion polls

None of the interviewed municipalities systematically organize public opinion polls, nor do they have any efforts to do so. Occasionally, citizens' satisfaction is surveyed, especially when drafting strategic documents such as the PHSR or the Community Social Services Plan. However, municipalities stated that this was the case in the past, and today, they do not even resort to such measures. Officials often responded that they consider elections public opinion polls to confirm citizens' satisfaction with their governance. Some respondents stated that they have been in office for more than 3 terms. Therefore, there is no need to survey satisfaction; it is just the knowledge that the citizens have re-elected them to the municipality's leadership.

The most immediate form of gauging citizen satisfaction and increasing their perception of sustainability was personal interviews with citizens and encouraging attendance at municipal council meetings. One representative confirmed holding monthly public meetings with citizens and collecting feedback through word of mouth. Two representatives said that citizens could give such feedback through forms on the website, which was confirmed in the content analysis of the websites of these municipalities.

However, in general, leaders prefer personal and direct communication with citizens, citing the size of the municipality and the fact that in smaller municipalities, citizens know each other and have a higher chance of meeting with a representative than in a larger municipality or city. The only town involved expressed that they felt the need for regular monitoring of citizen and/or staff satisfaction in their management, but this was not possible due to the high workload of the office staff.

Listening to citizens' needs and involvement in the management of the municipality

Municipal leaders are inclined to listen to citizens' needs, even if they do not regularly monitor them (based on findings from the previous interview question). According to the directors, personal interviews can gather the necessary information to ensure that citizens' needs can be heard and considered in governance. Each municipal official interviewed recalled encouraging active participation in municipal/city council meetings among citizens. They believe it is where citizens' needs can be heard and discussed the most. The mayors are also open to visits to the municipal office during office hours, which they say is used on average by citizens. They also confirmed their efforts to respond to citizens' phone calls and e-mail communication. Thus, the most frequently cited opportunities to engage in governance were:

- Active participation in the meetings of the Local Assembly,
- Personal conversation with the mayor or staff of the local authority,
- Telephone or e-mail communication,
- Public meetings and rallies,
- Systems for leaving suggestions on the website.

The finding that local government leaders want to listen to citizens and their needs is essential. It is, therefore, up to the citizens to increase their involvement in the municipality's governance and to want to be involved in the opportunities provided. Moreover, the officials interviewed said that the opportunities they provide for citizens to get involved in governance are sufficient but that citizens are only sometimes willing to use them.

Additional findings from the interviews

Outside of the structured questions, the representatives were allowed to comment on important topics related to sustainability and communication with citizens. Most often, they emphasized the openness of the governing body and its willingness to communicate with citizens. This is a means of increasing transparency and trust in the municipality. Representatives of rural municipalities also pointed to the differences between villages and towns and the advantages of proximity, openness and personal communication. On the issue of sustainability, there was a recurring emphasis on environmental protection, biodiversity conservation, and education.

A positive finding was that mayors generally perceived communication as a strongly supportive tool in building a sustainable community. However, the need for more awareness and reduced ability to convey this information to citizens remains a problem. In the words of the municipal leaders involved, it is vital that the state also powerfully demonstrates its efforts to inform and develop municipalities, which they commented negatively on, especially in the context of the current political situation in Slovakia. They also consider the training of employees and their high level of qualification to be essential factors. One representative commented that processes in the municipality can slow down considerably if it is not possible to find a sufficiently qualified person to work with sustainable development.

4.2. Hypothesis evaluation

The following hypothesis was stated: **If mayors are knowledgeable about sustainability, they consider this information in their management approach.**

We needed to answer the connected research questions to evaluate the hypothesis correctly.

RQ₁ How do municipalities enable citizens to engage in governance?

The interviews revealed that the governing officials try to encourage citizens to participate in the municipal council/municipal assembly meetings, which they perceive as an appropriate means for citizens to be involved in governance. However, in the words of the mayors interviewed, this option is not often used, and citizens want to see results without their direct involvement. Respondents reported that citizens can also be involved in the municipality's management through traditional conversations with them or with staff, whereby they can make suggestions and proposals for improvement, which they seek to have discussed at meetings of the Municipal Assembly.

RQ₂ How do those in charge approach the needs of citizens?

Citizens' needs are the priority for many mayors and are the most considered in management. Interviewed mayors consider citizen satisfaction as one of the biggest influences on governance, and they want to increase the active participation of citizens in governance. They are interested in the needs of citizens and are open to communicating with them, either in person or in other ways.

RQ₃ How do managers support staff training and professional development?

Managers are firmly open to further education for themselves and staff, as they say, they recognize the importance of updating the knowledge and information exchanged in municipal and city offices. At the same time, they also have the will to translate the acquired data into management and communication with citizens, especially in sustainability. Municipal leaders describe the need for more support from the state but often try to compensate for this with their positive approach to education and information.

RQ₄ Can managers identify what influences the management of local government?

The most significant influence, as we have already mentioned, is the satisfaction of the citizens, and those in charge try to take steps to ensure that the space of the municipality is improved to the satisfaction of the people. Another significant influence is the political situation in Slovakia and the EU, together with the laws and regulations from these bodies, which municipalities cannot influence and must react to. They often feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities and cannot attend to other problems in the municipality. However, the municipalities interviewed do not have a systematic procedure to identify impacts; these were only results from observation and the experience of the persons in charge.

RQ₅ What information do local government managers have on sustainability?

Municipal representatives said they are moderately informed about sustainability issues and work with them accordingly. However, they again identified a need for the part of the state and its approach to conveying such information, as they often must do their research and be proactive in education. They most often understand this issue from an ecological point of view, as this is where they carry out most of their actions and activities for the municipality and citizens. Managers clearly stated that if they have such information, they see no reason not to take it into their management and try to translate it as much as possible into their managerial responsibilities in the municipalities.

Based on the findings from the research and the answers to the research questions, we can logically argue that **hypothesis H is confirmed**. Thus, when mayors have sufficient information on sustainability issues and management, they will most likely consider this information in the municipality's management process. It is, therefore, essential that the mayors feel informed about sustainability and sustainable management.

4.3. Discussion

According to Fenton (2016), urban sustainability can be influenced by five main factors, both internal and external, namely *capacity*, *mandate*, *resources*, *scope* and *will*. These findings partially agree with our conclusions regarding influences on the sustainable management of local governments. In our research, the interviewed mayors stated mainly the external factors, such as *laws*, *environmental and financial policies* or *stakeholder groups*. The factor of *will* has been examined through the research questions, and we found that the mayors are open to education and more sustainable development and management in the municipalities.

A very similar research to ours was conducted in 2019 in Serbia, where the authors interviewed a couple of leaders in local governments, asking them questions on their approach to sustainability, development and education on these topics. They found that when the mayors have the needed knowledge about sustainability, they apply it to their management. This finding entirely agrees with our findings. The study also confirmed that effective local self-government leadership correlates with sustainable development principles (Marjanović et al., 2019).

The authors of a 2024 study in Africa argue that public-private partnerships can help local governments be more informed on sustainable development and achieve the desired status more easily (Ramolobe, Knahdanisa, 2024). They also state that communication is vital to achieving such partnerships and building and strengthening trust. In our research, the mayors realized that the right communication approach can help build relationships with the citizens, strengthening the community and trust.

Research from 2022 showed that a mayor's style of communication and leadership can positively influence the growth of businesses in the area (Meirobe et al., 2022). Even though we did not examine this factor, the chosen representative's communication approach can positively affect the whole community and the sustainability of the municipality.

According to 2019 research in China, a municipality's representative's leadership and management style plays an essential role in achieving sustainability in said municipality. Moreover, the study confirms that external communication with other municipalities can embrace these relationships, leading to better problem-solving (Liu, Yang, 2019). In our research, we agreed on the importance of internal or external communication.

When engaging citizens in the management process, Davies (2008) stated that communication with the municipality's representative can improve the relationships in the community and help to strengthen engagement. When the mayors knew how to interact with citizens, they used it in their management, which agrees with our findings.

Uncertain finances are also related to the possibilities for further education and increasing expertise in local governments. In our research, municipal representatives described insufficient interest and support in education from the government. These problems may continue to deepen, so managers and employees will not acquire the necessary information for sustainable management. A study from Brazil also indicated the need for more interest in communication between the state and local governments, leading to a lack of information on SDGs. The authors stated that this lack of information may lead to the failure to consider SDGs in regional plans. Still, they also found that this problem is connected to limited resources (as stated in our research), lack of political will (contrary to our findings) or the overall ability to implement SDGs to the local government management (Carvalho et al., 2024). Our research showed similar results, where the interviewed mayors stated that one of the main reasons for not implementing sustainability into the local government management is needing more information from the state.

A significant limitation of this study is the low interest among the contacted managerial personnel in participating in the research through interviews. As some have expressed, we understand that these representatives receive similar requests daily. From this perspective, it is undoubtedly appropriate to conduct similar research again and ensure a higher level of participation. This problem was also addressed in a 2022 study of Portugal municipalities, where the authors stated that there is still space for improvement in the digital

communication of representatives with citizens and other stakeholders, primarily via e-mail (Lameiras et al., 2022).

Several representatives of the studied municipalities mentioned in interviews that one of the most significant influences on the municipality's management is the government and the political situation in the country. Since municipalities are part of public policy, this factor must be considered, even considering limitations. During the past four years, four governments operated in Slovakia: those of Igor Matovič, Eduard Heger, the caretaker government of Ľudovít Ódor, and in September 2023, the return of Robert Fico's government after several years. Consequently, local governments lack a sense of certainty as regulations constantly change. The current government (as of April 2024) is already known for various controversial measures during its six-month tenure, including amendments to the penal code, the issuance of a law on public television and radio, and the announced potential loss of the flow of EU funds to Slovakia, particularly from the Recovery Plan (RTVS, 2024). EU funds are a crucial part of financing sustainable projects in municipalities. Thus, the uncertain financial situation may lead municipalities to decisions that deprioritize sustainability and focus only on immediately visible problems with pragmatic solutions. Moreover, if implemented, the latest draft of the road law would significantly limit the powers of municipalities, for example, in installing traffic signs or building bike paths, which are often part of municipalities' sustainable strategies (Zdút, 2024). The Association of Towns and Villages of Slovakia and SK8, the association of self-governing regions, has already opposed this proposal.

For future research, it would be suitable to broaden the research sample to other regions in Slovakia or neighbouring countries. Also, a second round of these questions would bring interesting information on whether anything has changed in the meantime, mainly influenced by the new government of Slovakia and the new President. Focusing more on communication with citizens may be useful, especially in researching the methods the interviewed mayors prefer to use, whether personal or digital.

Conclusions

An essential finding of this study is the link between knowledge of sustainability and management approach. Managers who are aware of sustainable principles are more likely to consider these aspects in the management process, which is critical to sustainable development. The concept of sustainability can contribute significantly to the effective management performance of local governments. It highlights the real needs of citizens and the professional work of local governments that consider these needs in a broader context: environmental, economic and social. From a managerial perspective, the process of education is necessary here. This needs to occur on the part of local government - its executive and managerial arms. Equally important is the education of citizens, which is the task of local authorities and, in the context of research, also of the State and the European Union. Yet, there still needs to be an excellent research gap addressing how local government representatives handle information on sustainability and how to implement it in management. Our research found that the Slovak mayors are willing to learn more about this topic and implement the information gained in their decision-making.

It is important to note that the mayors are open to citizens and their needs since they are considered to have the greatest impact on local government management. Thus, the representatives try to make space for the citizens to be heard and often engage with them in formal or non-formal meetings. Yet, the managers prefer direct contact and see no relevance in conducting polls among inhabitants. The interviewed mayors agree that communication is an excellent tool in achieving sustainability in a local government and want to be present for the citizens. The mayors' approach to sustainability in Slovakia has yet to be academically researched. Thus, this paper provides not only practical but also theoretical value.

In conclusion, this paper can contribute to the research on sustainable local governments by bringing together various perceptions of Slovak mayors. From the practical point of view, this study covers the actual and realistic approach to sustainability in Slovak local governments in 2024.

References

- Abhayawansa, S., Adams, C.A. & Neesham, C. (2021). Accountability and governance in pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals: conceptualizing how governments create value. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 34(4). <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-07-2020-4667>
- Andrews, L. (2018). Public administration, public leadership and the construction of public value in the age of the algorithm and big data. *Public Administration*, 97 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12534>
- AVS. (2024). *Asociácia vzdelávania samosprávy – Základné informácie*. Retrieved on February 25, 2024, from <https://www.avs-rvc.sk/avs-2/zakladne-informacie-1/>
- Bisogno, M., Cuadrado-Ballesteros, B., Rossi, F.M. & Peña-Miguel, N. (2023). Sustainable development goals in public administrations: Enabling conditions in local governments. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 89, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208523221146458>
- Branderhorst, E.M. & Ruijter, E. (2024). Digital leadership in local government: an empirical study of Dutch city managers. *Local Government Studies*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2024.2363368>
- Carvalho, S.A. et al. (2024). Assessing the Alignment of Brazilian Local Government Plans with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (pre-print). <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22284.32643>
- Čičmancová, E. (2022). The Importance of Communication in the Sustainability of Local Governments. *Proceedings of Comparative European Research (CER) Conference*, 2022 (1). Retrieved on July 8, 2024, from https://www.sciemcee.org/library/proceedings/cer/cer2022_proceedings01.pdf
- Davies, A. (2008). Understanding local leadership in building the capacity of rural communities in Australia. *Geographical Research*, 47(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-5871.2009.00586.x>
- Demjanovičová, M. & Varmus, M. (2021). Changing the perception of business values in the perspective of environmental sustainability. *Sustainability*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13095226>
- Deslatte, A. & Stokan, E. (2020). Sustainability synergies or silos? The opportunity costs of local government organizational capabilities. *Public Administration Review*, 80(6). <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13237>
- Drew, J., Miyazaki, M. & McQuestin, D. (2024). Is 'more' better? Testing the assumption that larger local governments are more sustainable. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 83, p. 106-122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12627>
- El Haber, N. & Nagpal, S. (2024). The role of managerial hierarchy in the moral reasoning of local government managers. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12633>
- Epstein, M. & Buhovac, A.R. (2014). *Making Sustainability Work*. London: Routledge, 2014. ISBN 978-1907643934.
- Eurostat. (2024). *EU progress towards the SDGs*. Retrieved on July 2, 2024, from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/sdi/key-findings>
- Fenton, P. (2016). *Sustainability – Strategy – Space – exploring influences on governing for urban sustainability in municipalities*. Dissertation thesis. Linköping University, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-7685-743-4. Retrieved on January 10, 2024, from <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2%3A940450/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Holubčík, M., Soviar, J., Lendel, V. & Čerňanský, J. (2024). Managerial Decision-Making Methodology to Support Innovation Activities: Evidence from Slovak Enterprises. *Systems*, 12, 144. <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems12050144>
- Hutchinson, J., Walker, E. & McKenzie, F.H. (2014). Leadership in Local Government: 'No Girls Allowed'. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 73(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12075>
- Jankelová, N., Čajková, A. & Larionova, N. (2018). *Moderné trendy v manažmente organizácií miestnej samosprávy ako nástroj trvalo udržateľného rozvoja*. Brno: MSD, 2018. ISBN 978-80-7392-285-6.
- Kim, J. (2018). Collaborative leadership and financial sustainability in local government. *Local Government Studies*, 44(6). <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2018.1512490>
- Koman, G., Kubina, M. & Holubčík, M. (2019). Applicability of the Big Data Solution to Support Decision-Making in Slovak Enterprises. *Vision 2025: Education Excellence and Management of Innovations Through Sustainable Economic Competitive Advantage*. 34th International Business Information Management Association (IBIMA) Conference [conference proceedings]. ISBN 978-0-9998551-3-3

Lameiras, M., Soares, D. & Amaral, L. (2022). Communication with local governments. An assessment of e-mail responsiveness. *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance*, p. 309-315. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3560107.3560303>

Liu, Y. & Yang, W. (2019). Leadership and Governance Tools for Village Sustainable Development in China. *Sustainability*, 11, 5553. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su11205553>

Marjanović, N., Janović, V., Ratknić, T. & Paunković, D. (2019). The role of leadership In natural resource conservation and sustainable development: A case study of local self-government of Easter Serbia. *Ekonomika Poljoprivrede*, 66(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5937/ekoPolj1903889M>

Mederly, P. et al. (2017). *Súčasný problém v regionálnom školstve a možnosti ich riešenia z pohľadu miest a obcí*. Národný projekt Centrum sociálneho dialógu II. Združenie miest a obcí Slovenska. Retrieved on February 20, 2024, from https://www.zmos.sk/download_file_f.php?id=1220822

Meiroke, I., Irawan, A.P. & Setyanto, Y. (2022). The Impact of Leadership Style in Local Government in the Development of Sustainable Micro Entrepreneurship. *Jurnal Komunikasi*, 14 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24912/jk.v14i1.15425>

Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic. (2019). *Agenda 2030 pre udržateľný rozvoj*. Retrieved on July 2, 2024, from <https://www.minzp.sk/agenda-2030/>

Nižňanský, V. (2002). *Samospráva vyššieho územného celku*. Bratislava: Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti, 2002. ISBN 80-968784-0-3.

Pavlik, M. (2014). *Jak úspěšně řídit obec a region. Cíle, nástroje, trendy, zahraniční zkušenosti*. Praha: Grada, 2014. ISBN 978-80-247-5256-3.

Ramolobe, K.S. & Khandanisa, U. (2024). The role of public-private partnership in achieving local government sustainable development. *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v12i1.816>

Rektořík, J. (2007). *Ekonomika a Řízení odvětví veřejného sektoru*. Praha: Ekopress, 2007. ISBN 978-80-86929-29-3.

RTVS (2024). *Premiér Fico priznáva, že Slovensko môže prísť o peniaze z Bruselu*. Retrieved on May 4, 2024, from <https://spravy.rtvs.sk/2024/04/premier-r-fico-priznava-ze-slovensko-moze-prist-o-peniaze-z-bruselu-z-intenzivni-preto-rokovania/>

Shava, E., & Vyas-Doorgapersad, S. (2023). Inclusive participation in information and communication technologies (ICTs) processes for smart services in the city of Johannesburg. *Insights into Regional Development*, 5(1), 26-40. [https://doi.org/10.9770/ird.2023.5.1\(2\)](https://doi.org/10.9770/ird.2023.5.1(2))

Svirak, N., Kwarteng, M., & Pilík M. (2023). Perceptions of social media usage to engage citizens: a qualitative study of Czech Republic municipalities. *Administrative Management Public*, 41, 163-181. <https://doi.org/10.24818/amp/2023.41-09>

SITA, (2021). *Najväčšiu dôveru Slovákov majú primátori a starostovia, verí im 2,5-krát viac ľudí ako vláde*. Retrieved on May 3, 2024, from: <https://sita.sk/najvacsiu-doveru-slovakov-maju-primatori-a-starostovia-veri-im-25-krat-viac-ludi-ako-vlade/>

STN ISO 9001:2015, *Požiadavky na systém manažérstva kvality*. Retrieved on March 15, 2024, from <https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/archive/pdf/en/iso9001-2015-process-appr.pdf>

Szarková, M. (2011). *Komunikácia v manažmente*. Bratislava: Ekonóm, 2011. ISBN 978-80-225-2525-1.

Wang, X., Wart, M. & Lebrede, N. (2014). Sustainability Leadership in a Local Government Context. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 37(3). <https://doi.org/10.2753/PMR1530-9576370301>

Zdút, M. (2024). *To, čo Kaliňák s Mažgútom pri bratislavskej cyklotrase začali, ministri dokončia. Koalícia siahne na právomoci miest a obcí*. Denník N, 2024. Retrieved on May 4, 2024, from <https://dennikn.sk/3837317/to-co-kalinak-s-mazgutom-pri-bratislavskej-cyklotrase-zacali-ministri-dokoncia-koalicia-siahne-na-pravomoci-miest-a-obci/?ref=list>

Funding: This research was funded by the Slovak Republic scientific grant APVV-20-0481.

Data Availability Statement: All data are available on request from the authors.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: *E.Č.*; methodology: *E.Č., J.S.*; data analysis: *E.Č.*, writing—original draft preparation: *E.Č., J.S.*, writing; review and editing: *E.Č., J.S.*; visualization: *E.Č.* All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Eliška ČIČMANCOVÁ, Ing. is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Management Theories, Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, University of Žilina, Slovakia. Research interests: Sustainability, Sustainable management, Local governments, Education

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2041-8581>

Jakub SOVIAR, prof., Mgr., PhD. is a professor at the Department of Management Theories, Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, University of Žilina, Slovakia. Research interests: Marketing, Online marketing, Sustainability, Sustainable Management, Management and marketing strategies.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3029-5607>

Copyright © 2024 by author(s) and VsI Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Center

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access