

The issue of environmental protection is inherently part of ongoing debates concerning the activities of modern companies. The subject is becoming of particular importance in light of the EU's environmental policy. The issue of environmental protection has become not only a problem in the field of business ethics, but has become central in legal solutions. There existed, as far back as the 1990s, the opinion among scientists and business practitioners that investing in activities to protect the environment were costs which can hardly bring equivalent benefits for the companies. However, with the changing business model, there began to emerge opinions pointing to opportunities of improving companies economic performance by minimizing negative impacts on the environment. The scientific world responded to the issue with numerous studies on relationships between environmental and economic results of a company. However, studies conducted have so far resulted in conflicting findings. Some researchers have claimed that better environmental results translate into better economic outcomes and improved competitiveness of companies. There are other researchers who deny the existence of a such relationship. The cause of such differences could be the non-inclusion of a company's specific features and prevailing external environmental conditions of companies in such studies.

It is assumed in related studies that some business entities are, in given circumstances, capable of improving their economic performance by engaging in actions for the protection of the environment. The situation, thus painted, does not apply in all cases though. Hence the current studies will focus on distinguishing the endogenous and exogenous conditions that allow to transform companies pro-environmental activities into improvements in their competitiveness.

The objective of the study is to identify links between environmental initiatives and companies internal factors of competitiveness, considering the level of socio-economic development of regions in Poland as well as the company's quantitative and qualitative features. The environmental initiatives being given consideration include pollution prevention, recycling of materials, waste reduction, reducing fuel and energy consumption as well as limiting water consumption. The factors of competitiveness being considered include quality, delivery, flexibility and cost. The effects of environmental initiatives will be analysed in terms of the level of regional socio-economic development, the companies' financial situation, the relative efficiency of companies and the status of the ISO 14001 environmental management system in existence in the company.

The objective of the current study will be achieved through the empirical analysis of both primary and secondary data. The source of the primary data are the questionnaire surveys conducted in manufacturing companies (sector 31 according to the North American Industry Classification System – NAICS), located in Poland's six regions (southern, central, north-western, northern, south-western and eastern). The source of information on companies is the Emerging Markets Information Service – EMIS. There were, according to the data contained in the platform (as at 22.11.2016), 22,277 manufacturing companies in operation in Poland. A representative sample of about 1,018 entities will be chosen using the stratified sampling method. The surveys will provide information hitherto not obtained. First, it will concern the company's commitment to environmental initiatives. Second, they will enable the definition of the role of the studied factors of competitiveness in business activities. Third, it will determine the status of the ISO 14001 environmental management system in operation in given companies.

Sources of secondary data are companies financial statements available on EMIS database. Information contained in these reports will be used to analyse the companies' financial situations. The discriminant analysis will serve as the evaluation tool. The officially available statistical data will, on the other hand, be applied to determine the level of development in the regions using the multivariate comparative analysis.

Going by the current trends to undertake initiatives to protect the natural environment the results obtained will be unique addition to existing theoretical and practical knowledge concerning the actual impacts of environmental activities in terms of the company's factors of competitiveness, being the material for competitiveness based on results. Additionally, the research findings will be used to develop potential solutions to demonstrate possibilities for use of impacts of environmental initiatives to increase companies' competitiveness.