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Green human resources management in the environmental protection institutions: qualitative study in the Republic of Serbia

Zeleno upravljanje ljudkim resursima u institucijama za zaštitu životne sredine: kvalitativna studija u Republici Srbiji

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Abstract

This study examines the practice and application of Green Human Resource Management (GHRM) in environmental protection institutions in the Republic of Serbia. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. Ten respondents from the Ministry of Environmental Protection, as well as environmental protection institutions and organizations, participated in the study. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo, through which five main themes were identified: (1) green recruitment and selection, (2) environmental training and employee development, (3) motivation and reward systems, (4) organizational culture and leadership, and (5) institutional barriers. The results indicate that management staff generally support the integration of sustainable practices into human resource management, particularly within environmental institutions. However, several barriers remain, including limited funding and the lack of environmentally focused training programs. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the importance of GHRM as a strategic tool for strengthening environmental responsibility within institutions and organizations.

Keywords**:** *green human resources management, environmental protection institutions, qualitative research*

Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje praksu i primenu zelenog upravljanja ljudskim resursima (GHRM) u institucijama koje se bave zaštitom životne sredine u Republici Srbiji. Istraživanje je sprovedeno primenom kvalitativnog pristupa zasnovanog na polustrukturisanim intervjuima. U istraživanju je učestvovalo deset ispitanika iz Ministarstva zaštite životne sredine, kao i iz institucija i organizacija koje se bave zaštitom prirode i životne sredine. Podaci su analizirani primenom tematske analize u programu NVivo, pri čemu je identifikovano pet glavnih tema: (1) zeleno zapošljavanje i selekcija, (2) ekološka obuka i razvoj zaposlenih, (3) motivacija i sistemi nagrađivanja, (4) organizaciona kultura i liderstvo i (5) institucionalne prepreke. Rezultati pokazuju da rukovodeće strukture uglavnom podržavaju integraciju održivih praksi u upravljanje ljudskim resursima, posebno u institucijama koje se bave zaštitom životne sredine. Međutim, i dalje postoje određene prepreke, poput ograničenog finansiranja i nedostatka ekološki orijentisanih programa obuke. Nalazi istraživanja doprinose boljem razumevanju značaja GHRM-a kao strateškog alata za jačanje odgovornosti prema životnoj sredini u institucijama i organizacijama.

Ključne reči*: zeleno upravljanje ljudskim resursima, ekološke institucije, kvalitativno istraživanje*

1. Introduction

The necessity to include environmental responsibility in all aspects of organizational management has increased in recent years following the world trend toward sustainability and environmental issues. Human resources management has become a major force of transformation to sustainability through green human resources management, which represents a strategic approach to achieving the goals of sustainability. GHRM includes processes of recruitment, training, motivation and leadership in accordance with environmental goals

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and emphasizes environmentally responsible behavior (Gupta & Kaur, 2024). The concept of GHRM has been researched in the context of private and multinational institutions, but there is a lack of studies within public environmental institutions. Although the topic of human resource management has been researched from different aspects, there is still a gap in the empirical results of research on GHRM in public institutions in this area. According to Yusoff et al. (2018), public institutions have rigid administrative framework and sometimes, even though, they are willing to apply new sustainable practices, they are limited. As well, it is very important to overview how staff and management understand, perceive, and apply GHRM principles and what the main drivers and barriers are in the process of potential transformation toward sustainability.

In the Republic of Serbia, environmental institutions are the main drivers of sustainable principles and polices, while their HR capacities are limited by finance and administrative factors. Even though there is awareness of integration environmentally focused polices into the HR sector, they are still inconsistent. Based on these facts, it is important to understand how HR practices are aligned with the institutionalization of sustainability.

The study was designed to explore environmental institutions' representatives' perception about GHRM and what factors influence the implementation/non-implementation of sustainable practices in this field. The aims of this study are focused on how representatives of the environmental institutions perceive GHRM, as well as to identify potential sustainable practices integrated into the HR sector and to overview the main factors that support or hinder GHRM practices. To achieve aims, we used a qualitative approach and thematic analysis (NVivo software) to collect data and interpret interview phrases. By focusing on institutions in the field of environmental protection, this study contributes to a better understanding of sustainable practices in the field of human resource management and operationalization in the context of bureaucratic procedures and available resources.

2. Literature review

Concept and definition of GHRM

The shift from a physical asset-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, where employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities are the most important factors, highlights the importance of human capital as a fundamental driver of innovation and competitive advantage (Pavlović, 2024). Green human resources management presents a novel concept which is mostly used in academic side in last decade. GHRM represents a new model of HR business which incorporates environmental responsibility into traditional human resources management (Renwick et al., 2023). Between the first studies e.g., Elkington (1998) indicates that the conceptual basis of GHRM is grounded on sustainable development principles, which highlight social, economic, and environmental dimensions. According to Dumont et al. (2017), GHRM represents a strategic approach to align HR management policy with environmental practices (e.g., trainings or employee initiatives), and it is not only a technical adjustment. In comparison with traditional HR management, GHRM includes environmental aspects into all stages of HR business and encourages sustainability within institutions (Molina-Azorin et al., 2021).

Sustainably oriented practices in human resource management

In the last decade, the question of green transformation in institutions has become an important aspect of business, especially in the HR sector, where employees are drivers of sustainable changes. Dumont et al. (2017) indicate that employees' attitude, values, and behavior are crucial for process of transformation and establishing practices toward sustainability. GHRM practice include green employment practices, environmental-friendly awarding system and the development of eco-leadership (Tang et al., 2028). The world umbrella organizations and public institutions (e.g., UNESCO, FAO, EU institutions) more often applying GHRM practices, which attracted attention from other institutions at the national level. Study by Lakhera & Sharma (2020) emphasizes that HR management in public institutions has a key role in environmental initiative promotion, raising awareness, and operational business support. Between main practices, Ismail and Abdelghani (2024) stand out in environmental evaluation, conducting training programs focused on sustainability and working space management (e.g., energy efficiency, recycling, saving water). Some studies emphasize that institutional support and environmental leaders' proactivity play important role in establishing GHRM practices in public institutions (Gürlek & Tuna, 2019). Besides these, empirical researches indicate that GHRM practices have a positive impact on environmentally oriented results and organizational management, especially in the field of cost reduction, better motivation of employees and reputation of institution (Renwick et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2020). In the public institutions, limited resources and bureaucratic procedures are very often represented by big challenges in the process of HR management alignment with sustainability goals. These issues about GHRM become more important in the context of environmental institutions, which are crucial for conducting environmental policy. The previous researches show that HR management in public institutions neglects the aspect of sustainability (Jackson et al., 2011). In the environmental public institutions, enterprises and agencies' application of GHRM practices could bring improvement in all dimensions of sustainability-ecological, social, and economic (Paillé et al., 2014).

Challenges in implementing environmental practices in the HR sector

The success of GHRM implementation depends on institutional capacity and readiness to include changes in traditional HR practices. The main factors which encourage changes in this sector are new policy frameworks which impose environmental responsibility,

leaders' dedication, institutional orientation toward sustainability, employees' initiatives, and ecological awareness (Jabbour & de Sousa Jabbour, 2016). Adoption of GHRM practices followed by technological improvement and availability of environmental tools, which facilitate the application of green practices in the HR sector (Dumont et al., 2017). On the other hand, barriers for success implementation of GHRM practices represent a lack of knowledge, financial funds, resistance of organizational stuffs toward changes and lack of precise environmental evaluations (Renwick et al., 2013). In the public institutions, additional challenges could be reflected in the complexity of procedures, divided responsibilities and different priorities. To overcome these challenges, studies highlight a combination of leadership support, continual training, and implementation of GHRM practices into policy framework (Sharma & Sharma, 2020). Taking into account these facts, it could be ensured that GHRM efficiency and initiatives together with a sustainability goal approach in public institutions.

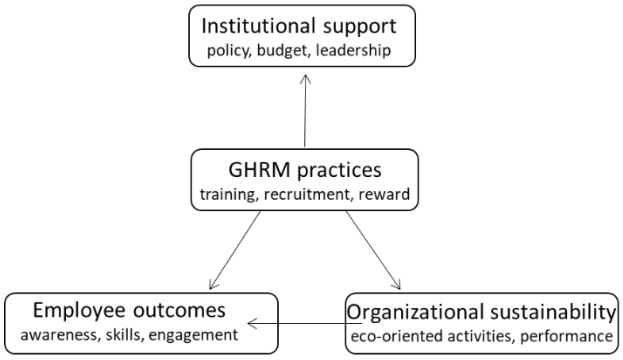
Qualitative studies in this field indicate the importance of changing perception of traditional HR practices and establishing leadership in the implementation of GHRM. The study by Kumar & Anas (2023), conducted in Indian agencies for environmental protection, show that the main barriers are related to lack of institutional training, limited financial funds and management support. Similar commitments are presented in study by Zimon et al. (2022), which highlights that green practices in the HR sector are still at the beginning and depend on financial support and international cooperation.

The Republic of Serbia is in the process of green transition and alignment with EU standards, especially environmental institutions, where GHRM plays an important role. Implementation of green practices in the HR sector could bring better institutional efficiency, encourage innovations and community engagement. If some studies researched sustainability and management in public institutions in Serbia (e.g., Talić et al., 2020), there is still a lack of systematic focus on GHRM practices in environmental institutions and other organizations. According to the mentioned gap, this research aimed to conduct qualitative research and analyse perceptions and challenges in GHRM practices in environmental institutions in the Republic of Serbia.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative design approach to examine perceptions, practices and challenges in the GHRM implementation in Serbian environmental institutions. The conceptual design of the study (Figure 1) represents the relationship between three research questions in the field of perception of GHRM (RQ1), practices in GHRM (RQ2), and drivers and barriers in the implementation of GHRM (RQ3). This study design illustrates 3 main aspects of GHRM which shape institutional orientation toward sustainability. The conceptual design gives a visual presentation of factors that influence of adoption of GHRM practices.

Figure 1. Study design concept of GHRM in the environmental institutions



Source: Author 's design

Data collecting and analysis

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with representatives of environmental institutions. The institutions were chosen according to their involvement in the environmental sector or environmental policy implementation on the national or regional level. The criterion by which participants were selected refers to their engagement in environmental management or HR-related work. The sample consists of 10 representatives/respondents involved in the interview (e.g., HR sector, professionals, staff with environmental background, management staff) from different environmental institutions such as the Ministry, Agencies, National parks, etc. (Table 1). The idea was to ensure diversity of environmental experience, and implementation procedures related to the research objective. The research was conducted during 2023, as part of wider research.

Table 1. List of institutions and respondents involved in research

Participants No.	Environmental institutions	Respondents' position
P1	Ministry of environmental protection	HR management sector
P2	Environmental protection agency	Expert, dept. for environmental monitoring
P3	National Park Tara	Ecologist
P4	National park Djerdap	Ecologist-fieldwork
P5	Municipality of Kragujevac, depart. for environmental protection	Advisor
P6	Municipality of Niš, dept. for environmental protection	Coordinator
P7	Institute for nature conservation of Serbia	Researcher, office for biodiversity
P8	Faculty of natural sciences, Kragujevac	Professor
P9	Organization Environmental ambassadors	Project coordinator
P10	Public enterprise Greenery	Officer

Source: Author 's design

The semi-structured interview was designed based on three research questions: RQ1(Perceptions of GHRM)- how employees perceive GHRM practice in environmental institutions?; RQ2 (Green HR Practices)- Which concrete practices reflected environmentally oriented principles?; RQ3 (Drivers and Barriers of GHRM)- which factors impact on support or obstacles in the process of implementation of GHRM? The questions were flexible and able respondents to answer in detail about GHRM issues.

Collected data stored in database and analyzed using NVivo software (online trial version; available at https://techcenter.qsrinternational.com/Content/nv15/nv15_standard_installation.htm). The first step was forming of categories according to the inductive and deductive approaches. The coding design was led by research questions and the theoretical background of GHRM and as well, based on respondents' responses. The process included several steps: familiarization with data, code design related to perception, practices and barriers, NVivo coding, and hierarchical relationships design, visualization using denrogram and graphs. Three codes are defined: perception of GHRM, practices in GHRM, and Barriers in GHRM, where designed several additional sub-themes. Hierarchical structure reflected the relationship between perception, practices, and institutional conditions in the field of GHRM. To increase the reliability of the findings, double coding was conducted for 20% of the transcripts, and disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. Triangulation was achieved by comparing thematic findings with existing literature and policy documents.

Additional analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics. Besides thematic analysis, it was applied calculation of the frequency of codes was applied to determine relative prevalence of some themes or concepts within the interview. The frequency of code represents how many times a phrase or theme is mentioned by respondents. Each segment of code counted as one reference and the total number of references (N) represents the sum of all coding phrases. Frequency index (Fi) calculated using the next equation:

$$F_i = n_i/N \times 100$$

n_i- number of references/phrases within a specific theme; N- total number of references in the whole dataset; The result F_i represents the relative weight of each theme.

4. Results and discussion

The results show alignment between codes and themes where perception, practices, and institutional challenges of GHRM are interconnected and involve the complexity of sustainable practices in environmental institutions. Table 2 represents harmonized relationship code-themes as a result of NVivo analysis and in alignment with research questions. Each defined code represents one aspect of analytical process while the themes show how these aspects are recognized and expressed in the interviews with respondents. For example, results show that RQ2- practices in GHRM are connected to training and development of employees or motivation and reward system. These themes aimed to demonstrate environmental practices integration into GHRM (e.g., recruitment, motivation or professional development). According to frequently mentioned by respondents, that highlighted leadership, management support, and environmentally oriented organizational practices, this kind of organizational climate are corresponding to RQ1- perception of GHRM. The third connection is between code RQ3- drivers and barriers, and limited funding, resistance to changes, and administrative procedures as part of institutional obstacles and barriers.

Table 2. Key identified theme and codes and their relationship

Themes	Alignment of theme-code-RQ		Frequency of mentioning	Index of frequency
Green recruitment and practices of selection	Green HR practices-RQ2	-eco-oriented hiring -HR sustainability criteria	6+4	15.6
Environmentally oriented training and employee development	Green HR practices-RQ2	-workshops -green skill training -awareness of stuff	5+8+7	31.3
Motivation and rewarding sustainable behavior	Green HR practices-RQ2	-eco-bonus -recognition program	4+3	10.9
Organizational culture and leadership	Perception of GHRM-RQ1	- support by management -leadership	9+6	23.4
Institutional barriers and constraints	Drivers and barriers of GHRM-RQ3	-limiting funding -policy gap -low motivation	5+4+3	18.8

Source: Author 's calculation

Each research question aligned with the main analytical code which produced a number of subthemes and representative respondents' quotes/phrases. The next three tables show extracted ten main findings connected to the research questions. Table 3 gives key perceptions of employees about the role of GHRM. Table 4 highlights practices in HR management oriented toward sustainability, while Table 5 represents how respondents perceived main obstacles and barriers in GHRM application. Overview of original respondents' quotations gives a deep understanding of researched context and illustrates the institutional ambient related to GHRM practices in the environmental sector.

Table 3. RQ1- How do employees perceive GHRM practice in environmental institutions?

Institution	Selected response (phrase)
P1	"We are aware of green HR practices, but implementation is limited by administrative procedures"
P2	"Employees value ecologically oriented initiatives, especially resources saving measures"
P3	"HR experts value GHRM as important, but it is not at the priority list"
P4	"Employees have interest in eco-training, but participation is voluntary"
P5	"GHRM perceived positively by staff, but there is lack of engagement, not clear policy"
P6	"GHRM recognized as process of recycling, reducing, reusing resources, especially paper"
P7	"Employees taking into account sustainability more like policy, less than daily practices"
P8	"Employees are aware about GHRM, but little management support"
P9	"Employees recognize eco-responsibility, but there is lack of incentives"
P10	"Majority of staff understand GHRM concept, but application inconsistent within institution"

Source: Author 's calculation

Table 4. RQ2- Which concrete practices reflected environmental oriented principles?

Institution	Selected response (phrase)
P1	"We have training on waste management, circular economy, etc."
P2	"Eco-responsible behavior is one of criteria in evaluation process"
P3	"Management staff encourage remote work, aware of ecological footprint"
P4	"Resource-saving actions are organized for stuff"
P5	"Employment procedure include assessment of environmentally friendly mindset"
P6	"We have paper, plastic recycling stations in almost all offices"
P7	"Staff propose green initiatives from time to time, and they are adopted by management stuff"
P8	"We prefer digital documentation rather than hardcopy, reducing paper"
P9	"Training on raising environmental awareness is conducted annually or twice"
P10	"We are encouraged for energy reducing and resources saving"

Source: Author 's calculation

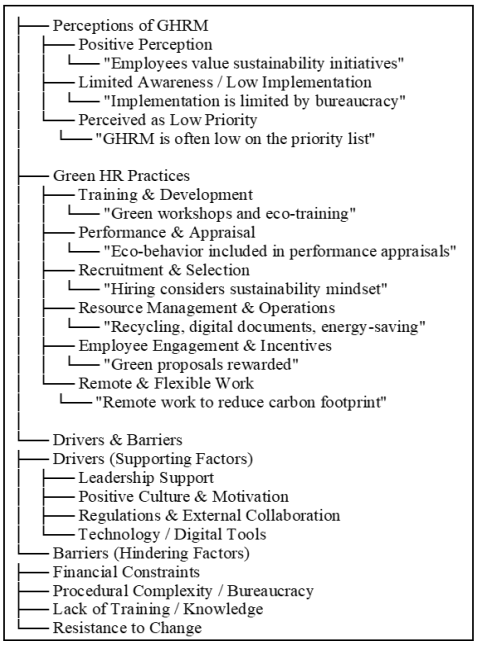
Table 5. RQ3- Which factors impact on support or obstacles in the process of implementation of GHRM?

Institution	Selected response (phrase)
P1	"Green practices adoptable if there is support by leadership"
P2	"Limited funding is often obstacle for sustainable practices/initiatives implementation"
P3	"Staff motivation encourages involvement in eco programs"
P4	"GHRM adoption is decelerated with complex administrative procedure"
P5	"Some institutional policy promotes green practices, but not integrated in all documents"
P6	"Lack of training slowed down employees to fully engaging toward sustainability"
P7	"Positive institution ambient/culture supports environmentally friendly initiatives"
P8	"Older employees are resistant to changes which slow down GHRM implementation"
P9	"Environmental performances are easier in recent times using technological tools"
P10	"Support and collaboration with external organizations facilitate GHRM"

Source: Author 's calculation

Using NVivo analysis it was extracted three main categories which reflect perception, practice, and institutional ambient related to GHRM practices in environmental institutions in Serbia. At the top of the hierarchy is the umbrella theme GHRM in environmental institutions, divided into three categories. The category of perception of GHRM includes several subcategories focused on how respondents valued practices oriented to sustainability. These three subcategories are: positive perception where respondents appreciate sustainable practices and initiatives, limited application as a result of administrative procedures and barriers and low priority as a result of other important aims of institution development. Green HR practices category includes activities oriented to sustainability goals achievement like a personnel training, evaluation of ecological practices, resources management through energy efficiency, saving water, paper, encouraging employees to be part of ecological initiatives and GHG reduction working from home or online. The third category includes drivers and barriers in GHRM implementation, and they are related to on the one hand with leadership support, motivation, digital tool, and on the other hand limited budgets, complex procedures, administrative obstacles.

Figure 2. Hierarchical analysis- dendrogram of code categories and subcategories



Source: Author 's calculation

The dendrogram (Figure 2) represents the hierarchical relationship and level of similarity between main codes and themes identified in previous NVivo analysis. The closer concepts are often mentioned in respondents' answers. Ecological trainings and development, Institutional ambient (culture and leadership) formed a very close group which implies that respondents perceive trainings and leadership as important in the context of sustainable HR practices. While opposite to this, barriers represent distinct groups highlighting their specific context in environmental institutions.

This hierarchical analysis indicates that awareness and positive attitude about sustainable practices in HR management are being incorporating slowly into the system and while administrative, and other obstacles limit GHRM integration into the traditional system.

Table 6 represents the prevalence of the main categories obtained using qualitative analysis of conducted interviews. Results show that green HR practices are the most often mentioned issue with 60 coded references, which makes up about 43% of the total analyzed data. This indicates that respondents talked about practical activities and innovations (such as trainings, environmental evaluation, or eco-friendly behavior) more than other issues. The second ranked is perception related to GHRM (e.g., how respondents value and understand GHRM) with 35 references or 25% of the total data. Even though respondents support green practices, there is still a lower level of awareness toward GHRM and a low priority rank in administrative ecosystem. The third category, drivers and barriers, is equally represented with 22 references.

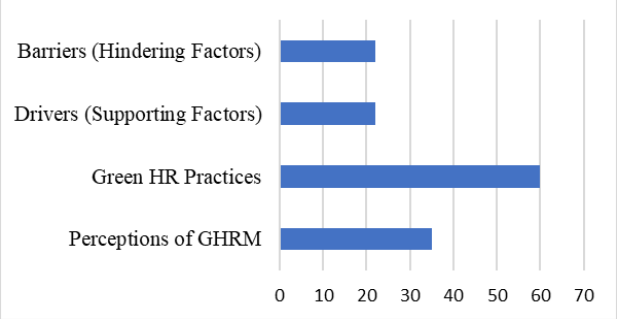
Table 6. The frequency of categories mentioned by respondents

Category-code	Number of references	Percentage (%)
1. Perceptions of GHRM	35	25
Positive perception	12	8
Limited awareness-low implementation	15	10
Perceived as low priority	8	7
2. Practices of GHRM	60	43
Training and development	14	10
Performance and appraisal	10	7
Recruitment and selection	9	6
Employees' engagement and incentives	12	8
Resources management	10	7
Remote and flexible work	5	4
3a. Drivers (factors which support)	22	16
Leadership support	8	6
Positive culture and motivation	6	4
Regulations and external support	5	4
Digital tool	3	2
3b. Barriers (factors which slow down)	22	16
Financial obstacles	7	5
Administration	6	4
Lack of knowledge and education	5	4
Resistance to change	4	3

Source: Author 's calculation

Overall, the distribution of code frequencies highlights that, although public environmental protection institutions in Serbia recognize the importance of GHRM, practical implementation remains uneven and often limited by institutional and financial challenges.

Figure 3. The total frequency of codes/major categories



Source: Author 's calculation

To summarize the findings, a graphic illustration (Figure 3) shows the overall distribution of the four main code frequencies highlighted by public environmental protection institutions in Serbia, starting from Green HR practices (60 references), then Perceptions of GHRM (35 reference) and finally Barriers and Drivers with 22 references.

This discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature and theoretical perspectives on green human resource management (GHRM). The results provide insight into how institutional context, perception, leadership, and administrative structures shape the adoption of green human resource practices in public environmental institutions in Serbia. The results in general show that environmental institutions recognize the importance of GHRM, but the implementation is not consistent and limited by funding opportunity and administrative complexity. Serbian environmental institutions are aware and slowly include the concept of GHRM, what indicates increasing interest and willingness, especially in the aspects of training, leadership and organizational system. The results of this study are in align with previous researches, which

highlight also trainings and engagement of environmental leaders as key drivers of GHRM in the era of green transition in European counties (Ren et al., 2022; Zaharini, 2024). The high prevalence of issues like environmental training indicates that institutions perceive knowledge and capacity development as key factors in approaching sustainability goals. This trend was noted in a study by Jabbour and de Sousa Jabbour (2016), which highlighted that employees' competence is crucial for GHRM. As well, an emphasis on leadership and organizational system (culture) emphasizes dedication of management and the principle "up-bottom", what was presented in Mousa & Othman (2020) within findings from South East European countries' institutions. Leadership emerged as a crucial factor linking institutional strategy to operational implementation of GHRM. This finding is consistent with Mousa & Othman (2020), but in the Serbian context reflects the influence of hierarchical management models typical of public administration, where commitment to leadership often replaces systemic incentives. Leadership commitment shapes organizational culture and accelerates the adoption of green HR practices. The next mentioned issues in our study like drivers and barriers, emphasize administrative challenges, limitation of funding, resistance to changes which is consistence with Yusoh at al. (2023), who noted that financial and administrative obstacles slow down GHRM implementation. The system of motivation and awarding is of low prevalence in respondents' perception what suggests that sustainable practices are not completely incorporated in public or private sector. As it indicated in the studies by Pham et al. (2020) and Tang et al. (2022), the success of GHRM depends on cultural and leadership factors which shape institutional identity toward sustainability besides HR a technical process. Similar findings were noted by recent research by Navajas-Romero et al. (2022) and Lawter et al. (2025) which highlighted that dedication of management in the incorporation of ecological values represent a formula for success. Some evidences from public sector show that leaders' engagement and continual learning are the key link between sustainable polices and HR practices. This research in Serbian environmental institutions confirms implementation and slow transition to green practices in HR sector.

5. Conclusion

This study examined perception, practices, and institutional factors related to GHRM in environmental institutions in the Republic of Serbia using a qualitative approach and NVivo thematic analysis. The three main categories were identified: perception of GHRM, practices in GHRM and drivers and barriers in the implementation process. The results show that respondents recognize importance of green practices in the HR sector, but they are still limited and inconsistent. The key practices emphasized by respondents are training, employment with criteria of sustainability, and ecological evaluation. The success in this field of HR management depends on leaders' dedication, organizational cultural system and available resources. The support of management and external institutions represents the main drivers, while limited funds and complexity of administration are the main barriers.

The limitations of this study lie in the relatively small sample and the results cannot be generalized. Some perceptions could be the result of loyalty to the institution or self-promotion motives. And finally, this study was limited to only environmental institutions what doesn't reflect the general situation toward GHRM in other sectors.

The future research should be spread across institutions and sectors. As well, it could be useful to include the private sector and to make comparison. For better and more indicative result it could be important conduct quantitative analysis beside the qualitative approach.

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