

Corporate Social Responsibility: An Overview

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Abstract

Nowadays, companies may benefit from the opportunity of developing and growing in a new business environment which is based on principles such as common wellbeing and welfare, sustainability and durability. Competitive advantage and economic and social growth may be perceived as benefits promised by a CSR business approach. The concept may be described as a trend from the economic sphere which may help organizations to survive and achieve objectives by doing good, being ethical, legal, philanthropic, willing to educate others, support and sustain the environment, society and next generations. The paper aims to present a conceptual framework that can be used to define CSR. The research methodology was based on the collection and analysis of secondary data, respectively scientific articles, and relevant books for the subject. The results outline the idea of what CSR is and how it can positively impact the business environment.

Key words: CSR, stakeholders, Carroll's pyramid, social contract, society

J.E.L. classification: M14, I3, D64

1. Introduction

Nowadays, companies might benefit of developing and growing in a new business environment. Individuals, as partners of interests, expect a business to be responsible and to be accountable of its actions and impact among the society. Transparency, good reputation, loyalty, commitment, competitive advantage and economic and social growth may be perceived as benefits promised by a corporate social responsibility (CSR) business approach. CSR is a concept that goes beyond the usual way of doing business (Toma *et al*, 2001; Toma, 2006; Toma, 2008). It may be described as a trend from the economic sphere which may help organizations to survive and achieve objectives by doing good, being ethical, legal, philanthropic, willing to educate others, support and sustain the environment, society and next generations (Toma & Hudea, 2012).

CSR is not only about the funds and the expertise which companies decide to invest in the communities in order to solve pressuring social problems, even though many organizations do contribute to this regard. CSR represents the integrity approach of an organization which decides to operate and self-govern, fulfil its mission, respects its values, build relationship with stakeholders, measure and minimize its impact through actions communicated transparently to the larger public (Oprea, 2011).

This article includes the basic information needed to outline the idea of what CSR is and how it may be defined, contributing to a better understanding of the concept. The definitions presented are analysed based on distinctive and common elements associated with the term. The conceptual framework of CSR is developed starting from the characteristics illustrated by the most common

theories associated with the notion. The aim of this study is to clarify the concept of CSR through some relevant theories associated with the notion.

This paper is structured as follows. The upcoming section represents the literature review (2nd section), which is divided into four parts: an overview of the four responsibilities of an organization (Caroll’s Pyramid); exploring the opportunity of building lasting and prosperous relationships between the company and its partners of interest (Stakeholder Theory); assumption of bilateral obligation giving the exchange that takes place between an economic entity and the society (the social contract theory); corporate social performance and competitive advantage as likely results of an CSR business approach. Afterwards is presented the description of the research methodology (3rd section), followed by the results and discussions (4th section) and conclusions as ending part of the article.

2. Literature review

Since the 1950s social responsibility has constituted a topic of interest for researchers from various domains as it is found in numerous organizations (Marinescu *et al*, 2010; Toma *et al*, 2011; Imbrișcă & Toma, 2020; Zainea *et al*, 2020). CSR represents a phenomenon from the economic sphere that targets economic entities regardless of their typology, and its applicability depends mostly on the policies practiced at the organizational level. The concept was born from the understanding need of the general role that businesses play at the social level and what are these duties that they should address to establish the common good, giving the fact that organizations existence and functionality depends mostly on the resources that come from outside the company and external parties from the business environment.

Although the role of business in the society has been debated for hundreds of years, if not more, the concept of CSR began to take shape in 1953 when Howard R. Bowen published the “Social Responsibilities of the Businessman” (Beal, 2014, p.1). The same questions that motivated Bowen remained relevant today. What responsibilities do organizations have to contribute to the development of the society? What are the benefits received after the assumption of these duties? What are the steps that need to be taken to encourage businessman to pay even more to these obligations? Bowen defined these social duties of the businessman as “orientations of the managerial action through which the desired results are achieved, considering the values of the company” (Bowen, 1953).

Thus, the concept of CSR, once introduced, has been debated and developed by other academics and researchers. For example: Freeman (1984) launched the Stakeholders Theory, indispensable, even today, when building a favorable argument for the importance and applicability of CSR in business; Wartick and Cochran (1985) are those who brought forefront the social performance of companies, marking the transition to the concerns regarding the results of CSR actions; Caroll (1991) contributed to the conceptual framework of the notion by creating the model of CSR (Caroll’s Pyramid); Porter and Kramer (2006) correlated the competitiveness of a company with the CSR strategy; Weiss (2008) used the social contract theory “to highlight the direct link between CSR, enterprise, society and stakeholders” (Katamba, *et al.*, 2012, pp.6-10).

The contributions of these authors represent the theoretical perspectives frequently approached in the existing literature concerning the conceptual framework of CSR. Caroll’s Pyramid captures the four types of responsibilities that an economic entity should consider. Stakeholders theory highlights the role that CSR plays in maintaining the wellbeing of economic relations. The theory of the social contract emphasizes the existence of bilateral obligations between the organizations and the society, and CSR may be described as a beneficial way in which these duties are fulfilled by economic entities. The corporate social performance (CSP) model proposed by Wartick and Cochran starting from the principles of CSR emphasized on the importance of the obtained results and the relationship formed between the organization and its external environment. The gained result by an economic entity that integrates CSR in the business strategy translates into benefits for itself (for example, competitive advantage) and /or for the society.

The fact that there are also researchers who have vehemently challenged the relevance of CSR for the business environment cannot be omitted, Milton Friedman being one of them. Friedman stated: "the only responsibility of a business is increasing its profits" (Katamba, et al., 2012, p.7). Milton argued that government institutions are responsible for the wellbeing of society and, to the same extent, they are the ones who can provide help to those in need, through an optimal use of the funds accumulated from taxes.

Although there are pros and cons regarding the relevance of integrating the concept of CSR in the business strategy, in recent years, the term is one of major interest for researchers, companies and society in general (Simionescu, 2018, p.45).

There are many definitions that can be used to develop an understanding of the notion, but none of them has been globally accepted as the common reference. In consequence, the need for further research regarding the term of social corporate responsibility is still required.

2.1 Carroll's Pyramid

Carroll's pyramid is one of the most referenced conceptual frameworks from the existing literature used for the explanation of CSR (Dani, et al., 2019). Carroll stated that "the social responsibility of economic entities includes the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations (currently known as philanthropic responsibilities) that the society associates or assigns to organizations, of any kind, at a given time" (Carroll & Beiler, 1975, p. 593). Thus, the base of the pyramid and the first responsibility of a company is to be profitable. The economic entity must comply to the existing laws and regulations. Then, it should follow the expected ethical principles. And finally, the organization should consider and respond to the needs of the communities, environment and society by creating additional benefits (Voiculescu & Neagu, 2016). As a result, the four stages of the pyramid are, as follows: economic responsibility, legal and juridical responsibility, ethical responsibility and discretionary responsibility, currently known as philanthropic (Carroll, 2016).

Starting from this framework drawn by Carroll, many of the definitions of the concept of CSR have been developed. Therefore, the notion of CSR is used "to report the economic, legal, ethical and social expectations by which the community urges companies to adopt responsible business strategies" (Shah & Khan, 2019, p.159).

CSR may be perceived as a way of increasing profits in an ethical manner, considering the legal, social and economic commitments to the parties that support, in one way or another, the survival of enterprises. Additionally, CSR may be described "an effective tool used for educating individuals and a sustainable approach that facilitates a company to progress" (Dumitrașcu, 2015, p.121).

2.2 Stakeholder Theory

The fundamental objective of an economic entity, regardless of its size, is represented by the maximization of profits (Friedman, 1970). The financial gain is obtained through the commercialization of products and/or services that result from the transformational process of available resources, namely the human, material, financial and information ones (Toma, 2013, pp.248-249).

The individual may be perceived as the engine of an organization. He is the one who has the power to act and to make decisions (how and why resources are used). The way he runs a business or fulfills his duties is closely related to the success or failure (size of the profit or loss) of a company.

Furthermore, organizational management contributes significantly to the survival and the prosperity of an economic entity (Crișan, 2013, p.93). Starting from Drucker's theory, Freeman added: "regardless of the ultimate goal of a company, the effects of the decisions made in order to achieve the goal and how others are likely to be impacted, constitute the elements that must be analyzed and considered" (Freeman, et al., 2010, p. 426). According to Freeman, if organizational management were to proceed in this way, then CSR would no longer be a useful concept, because business would follow one another considering all the groups and individuals that could suffer because of the activity carried out by an economic entity.

The stakeholder theory stated by Freeman highlights the importance of integrating the CSR into the business strategies. The concept aims to create a balance between the interests of the vital parties of an organization. The manager has the duty „to identify who are the essential stakeholders for his company and how he can meet their expectations while simultaneously applying the principles of inclusive thinking, but also the cost-benefit one” (Crişan, 2013, p.94). The role of CSR, taking into account Freeman's theory, is to build beneficial relationships with the relevant stakeholders of an economic entity.

CSR „maintains the wellbeing in the relationship established among the company and its stakeholders” (Voiculescu & Neagu, 2016, p.99). Internal stakeholders include: employees (human resource), shareholders (financial resource) and managers / owners (information resource, respectively the know-how). External stakeholders include as follow: suppliers (material resource), business partners (potential financial resource), customers (financial resource), markets (financial resource), local communities, non-governmental organizations and associations, national and international institutions and governments (Voiculescu & Neagu, 2016, pp.114-115). Almost all external stakeholders have a potential that could contribute, directly or indirectly, to the increase of the financial capital of a firm (Moon, 2014, p.22).

2.3. The social contract

Another theoretical perspective on relationships built on the principles of CSR is highlighted by Weiss and his theory of the social contract that is established between the organization and the stakeholders. According to the theory this contract occurs when there is an exchange between individuals and the economic entity (Morris, 1999). This agreement imposes „the existence of a set of rules, obligations and hypotheses regarding behavioral patterns between the different elements of society” (Simionescu, 2018, p.52).

Simultaneously, the social contract signifies the base on which the beneficial relationship between the company and the stakeholders is built. Corporate social responsibility captures all the activities carried out in accordance with the obligations that an organization must fulfil based on the perception of the society regarding the attributes of an economic entity (Chaudary, et al., 2016). Or, the concept can also be seen as "a general term that describes the various responsible activities in which companies can engage" (Feder & Weißenberger, 2018, p.106).

By associating the Stakeholder Theory and the Social Contract Theory with Carroll's Pyramid, several definitions regarding the CSR concept have been proposed. Additionally, CSR „illustrates the management of the stakeholders concerns about responsible and irresponsible acts related to environmental, ethical and social aspects, in a way that generates corporate benefits”(Mercade-Mele, et al., 2018, p.432). Alternatively, it may be described “as the organisational consideration of several stakeholders and the overall impact, beyond simply focusing on maximising shareholder wealth” (Smith, 2007, p.188). Moreover, the CSR may complement these elements without which an enterprise could not function, representing „the added value of practiced management, a technique used to ensure a good collaboration between the firm and its stakeholders, but also a sustainable way of protecting and helping both the environment and individuals” (Cohen, 2011, p.25).

2.4. Corporate social performance

Wartick and Cochran (1985) are the ones who rised awareness around the concerns regarding the results of CSR actions by creating a model which associated the concept with that of corporate social performance (PSC). In the author's view, PSC has been used as a synonym for CSR or any other interaction between society and an economic entity (Simionescu, 2018). Wood (1991) further extended the definition, explaining the PSC notion as: “the configuration in a business organization of the principles of social responsibility, the processes of responding to social and political requirements, in concrete programs and results that reflect the relationship between the firm and the society” (Simionescu, 2018, p.52).

The result obtained by an economic entity that integrates CSR in the business strategy translates into benefits for itself (for example, gaining competitive advantage) and/or society. Thus, for many of the companies, CSR has become „a basic component of their mission, values, vision and strategy” (Oprea, 2011, pp. 215-216).

Porter, possibly one of the most cited authors on business strategies, argued that social responsibility is “a way through which a company can develop competitive advantage” (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Moreover, “CSR implies the combination of responsible activities, involving individuals from both inside and outside of the company, in these activities” (Shah & Khan, 2019, p.161).

Nowadays, the most used definitions for CSR have been provided by the European Commission and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). The European Commission stated that „economic entities should have in place a process to integrate social, environmental, ethical and human rights concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders” (Nordman, 2011, p.3). On the other hand, WBCSD argued that „CSR represents the continuing commitment by businesses to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large” (Nordman, 2011, p.4). Even the name, “CSR” links the notion with a specific economic entity, respectively corporations. But this concept is no longer expected to be implemented only by the big companies and its applicability has been, at this moment, extended also to the smaller economic entities, fact outlined in these last references provided in this paper.

In the past, CSR was considered as an optional concept, but nowadays the global and competitive business environment does not allow economic entities to neglect the importance of social responsibility (Grimstad, et al., 2020, p.553).

3. Research methodology

The present study represents a quantitative research. It involves the collection and analysis of secondary data (scientific articles and existing books relevant for the topic). After setting the research aim objective, respectively developing a conceptual framework that can be used to define CSR based on exiting literature, the first step conducted in this research in order to achieve the stated objectives was finding relevant scientific journals for defining the concept. Well-known sources such as Emerald Insights and ScienceDirect were used in this scope.

The second step followed was building a data base with the definitions and characteristics of CSR. Based on the collected information the structured of this paper has been develop in accordance with the used journals. This approach regarding the consolidation of the structure is similar with the other papers such as Grimstad (2020), Pérez (2013) or Graafland and van de Ven (2006).

Starting from a briefly introduction of the importance and key theoretical perspectives regarding CSR, the conceptual framework of the notion emerges based on similarities and some distinctive found using the provided definitions.

As a practice identified in the stated journals, the analysis began with the presentation of the evolution of CSR conceptual framework based on the main theories associated with the notion (Bowen’s vision and questions, Carroll’s Pyramid, the stakeholder theory, the social contract theory and the corporate social performance). The definitions provided as reference have been analyzed based on common and new elements or characteristic associated with the CSR concept. A conceptual framework has been created in this regard based on the identified aspects. Findings reveal the fact that CSR implies the existing of three essential elements, namely collaboration between parties, commitment and change. The following step was adding a supplementary component to the structure of the conceptual framework developed in previous phase, namely the manager’s and the company’s motivation to embrace CSR policies giving the fact that these act as an important trigger in favor of CSR integration in the strategy of the business. Motivation have been viewed as an important factor that facilitates the adoption of a CSR business approach also by other researchers. For example, Grimstad (2020, pg.554) stated that “an understanding of motives for CSR, and, more importantly,

how motivation relates to CSR activities, provide useful insights for the industry itself, as well as for national and international authorities regarding policy formulation and implementation".

4. Findings and Discussions

Starting from the analyzed definitions, a properly understanding of the CSR notion can be build using the following theoretical approaches: Carroll's pyramid (which responsibilities?); stakeholders and the social contract theory (to whom?); Corporate social performance (what results?). The first one outlines the dimensions of the organization's responsibilities. The following, namely the stakeholder theory, indicates the importance of finding the relevant parties towards the responsible action should be oriented to. Furthermore, from a beneficial point of view, managing responsible the interests of stakeholders contributes to strengthening the relationships formed between an economic entity and its admissible partners. Corporate social performance and the competitive advantage represent essential benefits that may contribute to the prosperity and profitability of a company as result of a responsible business approach.

Thus, Carroll's pyramid may be perceived as a first answer to Bowen's question regarding the identification of those responsibilities applicable to an economic entity concerning the society. On the other hand, the stakeholder's and the social contract theory, the CSP and the competitive advantage acknowledges the benefits of the company which integrates CSR in its business strategy (Bowen's second question). The last inquiry of Bowen's outlines the need of creating motivation for persons who operate in the business environment to adopt CSR practices. Most of the definitions provided in this paper regarding the CSR notion are drawn based on the presented theoretical perspectives and, moreover, aim to stimulate individuals to consider CSR as a useful concept for their strategies by presenting the benefits which may occur being a responsible business.

The conceptual framework based on the identified common and distinctive elements can be describe a mix of several components such as: economic entities, management strategy, stakeholders, responsibilities, economic and social development, change (Figure no. 1). Organization should attempt to establish an adequate collaboration with its relevant stakeholder by adopting a responsible management strategy and fulfilling its economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic duties. Joining forces with commitment, the organization and its partners of interest, may contribute to a sustainable economic and social development. A positive change among the society and the business environment may occur if all parties would embrace CSR practices. CSR may start an initiative of an economic entity, but the effective change takes place when all the components of a society are connected and make efforts in this regard. Probably, another main duty of an organization is to educate itself and others to adopt a responsible vision and way of doing business. On the other side, stakeholders should assume their own responsibilities, be willing to learn and be motivated to follow a responsible path. The common effort is essential for the implementation of CSR. Organizations can start this initiative by being accountable of its actions, fulfilling its responsibilities and finding a suitable management strategy that enables others to learn and establish a strong, beneficial and proper relationship with its partners of interest, internal or external.

Figure no. 1. The conceptual framework needed to define CSR following the revision of the definitions



Source: Author's own contribution based on literature review analysis

The activity carried out by an organization is influenced by the environment, the society and other stakeholders. Resources, regardless of their type, are used for achieving the firm's objectives. Initially, most of these assets come from the external environment of the company and later they become internal or essential parts a business (for example, the employees). A proper collaboration between these three elements- organization, environment, society, is required for economic and social development. As any cooperation, it implies the existence of a set of responsibilities and obligations. Above all, the organization needs to apply a strategic management approach that enables it to be profitable in a legal and ethical manner. Thus, by embracing the philanthropic responsibility, companies have the possibility to act, change and resolve social problems, contributing to the wellbeing of the society. If the firm can fulfil its duties, an economical and societal behaviour is set as a benchmark and used as a reference for other economic entities.

The uniqueness of the CSR concept relays on its capacity of driving sustainable growth for both the company and the society. Even though an algorithm with the steps that need to be followed in order to define a business as responsible was not been developed yet, the existing literature illustrates important characteristics of the concept. Above all, CSR starts as an initiative of an organization or individual. The social responsibility of an economic entity revolves around the individual who has the capability of making decisions on a daily basis. Understanding why and what motivates companies and managers to adopt CSR practices may facilitate the comprehension of the concept.

As also Bowen (1953) outlined in his paper regarding the duties of the businessman towards the society, that motivation plays a significant role in encouraging individuals to accept and fulfil these moral obligations. Existing literature mostly focus on Bowen's initial first two questions and developing an understanding of the concept starting from the expectations of the society, the implied responsibilities and the benefits that may occur for a responsible business. Even though there are studies which attempt to answer Bowen's third question and reveal the motives behind the willingness of a company or individual to support a CSR orientation, a certain response has not been yet provided and additional research is required.

Furthermore, most of the existing theories reflect the philanthropic responsibilities as voluntary and depending on the motivation of the company and of the individual able to make decisions. For instance, returning to the four responsibilities stated by Carroll, the first three of them have an obligatory character and their non-compliance entails sanctions for the organization. In contrast, the fourth responsibility represents an optional variant and it totally depends on the individual's or the firm's motivation to solve social issues and offer support to those in need. Being a voluntary responsibility, the organization cannot be held accountable by authorities or existing law, but it can be by other members of the society based on moral consideration. Motivation may be perceived as the agent that determines the desire to change and act, improving the living conditions of others. Even in the stakeholder theory the philanthropic responsibilities may be considered as of secondary importance through the communities and the NGOs declared as external stakeholders of an organization, depending also on the willingness of a company to contribute to the wellbeing of others.

The interest for the CSR has increased remarkably in the past decade among researchers and businesses. Initially, the conceptual framework of CSR has been viewed as combination of four organizational duties designed for meeting the expectation of the community. An additional layer was added by the association of the concept with the stakeholder theory. From a general perspective to a more business specific one, CSR became a form of balancing interests and creating beneficial connections for an organization. Furthermore, CSR implementation depends on the managing strategy chosen for the functionality of the economic entity. Thus, by focusing on the results of organizational actions, CSR has become, nowadays, a tool that may be used to educate and create value for individuals and economic entities, drive sustainable development and influence societal and economic behaviour and development. CSR represents a complex concept and further research is requested to develop a proper understanding of the notion and its application.

5. Conclusions

Many of the existing organizations began to change their way of doing business by adopting CSR practices. CSR might contribute to the creation of a more durable and sustainable business environment, focusing on the common good. The concept has become a topic of interest for researchers, companies and individuals that aim to make positive changes, due to its contribution on the social and economic level. The emergence of CSR is clearly a proof of increased involvement among individuals and human mentality, in general.

Multinational corporations represent the main players which are promoting the CSR concept and most existing studies tend to address them by the way in which information related to social responsibility is presented (for instance, the problems raised by this concept, the benefits resulting from CSR integration in the business strategy). Despite the size of the organization, motivation represents an important agent that contributes to the adoption of CSR practices.

The outcome of this study concurred with other theoretical approaches on defining CSR, for instance Mercade-Mele (2018). The conceptual framework has been stated using the common and distinctive elements from some of the most used theories and definitions associated with the notion of CSR, creating a clear structure of the components relevant for the analyzed topic. The organization's motivation plays an important role in facilitating the integration of CSR as a practice of the business. This affirmation is also supported by other researchers, for example Grimstad (2020). Thus, this is the reason why a complete definition of CSR should take into consideration also an understanding of the principal motives that trigger individuals to make responsible choices for their companies. This study has its limitations. For instance, only four of the most relevant and often associated theories with the concept of CSR have been discussed. Future research can be conducted in order to improve and sustain the viability of this theoretical model. Furthermore, the analysis can be extended with other relevant concepts correlated with CSR.

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