

## Study on GRI Reporting of Non-Profit Organizations in Europe

Leontina Pavaloaia<sup>1</sup>, Roxana Dicu<sup>2</sup>, Gabriel Chelariu<sup>3</sup>, Daniela Mardiros<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** GRI reporting was created with a dual purpose: on one hand, to grow awareness for the entities, regarding the importance of their involvement in social activities, and on the other hand, to answer to the need of transparency of stakeholders in decision-making process. For this reason, in 2010, non-profit organizations have begun to upload their reports on the GRI website, pointing out that their activities fall within the social side of society, perhaps more than the case of economic organizations. The cognitive approach starts with the presentation of six versions published by this institution, as a response to the necessity to identify indicators with an increased degree of relevance, comparability and verifiability. Subsequently, by accessing the GRI database for the period 2010-2015 and with reference to the European area, a classification of non-profit organizations was considered, at international and European level. In order to present the importance of the GRI reports, the paper presents the progress of these organizations, in presenting their voluntary activities according to GRI versions which were applicable at the time and types of certifications of their published data (C, C +, B, B +, A, A +, in accordance-core and in accordance-comprehensive).

**Keywords:** environment; social reporting; sustainability; transparency

**JEL Classification:** Q01; Q50; Q56; M48

### 1. Introduction

Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is an international institution whose mission is to establish guidelines for the publication of nonfinancial information on sustainable development. It was established following an initiative of non-profit organizations and large companies from Boston, by the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES) in partnership with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Initiated in 1997, GRI has published so far six versions of its regulations (Figure 1), being considered currently the most representative collections of principles and standards for voluntary reporting. The revisions of its standards prompted by the fact that the agenda on sustainable development has changed, and organizations have been facing continuously new challenges in reporting. In fact, GRI does not regulate the behaviour of an entity, but rather helps describing the outcome of adopting and implementing practices, policies and management systems aimed at involving the entity in social and environmental activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, PhD, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania, Corresponding author: [betianu@uaic.ro](mailto:betianu@uaic.ro).

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, PhD, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania, E-mail: [roxana.dicu@uaic.ro](mailto:roxana.dicu@uaic.ro).

<sup>3</sup> PhD Student, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania, E-mail: [gabriel.chelariu@feaa.uaic.ro](mailto:gabriel.chelariu@feaa.uaic.ro).

<sup>4</sup> Associate Professor, PhD, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania, E-mail: [mardirosdanielajob@gmail.com](mailto:mardirosdanielajob@gmail.com).

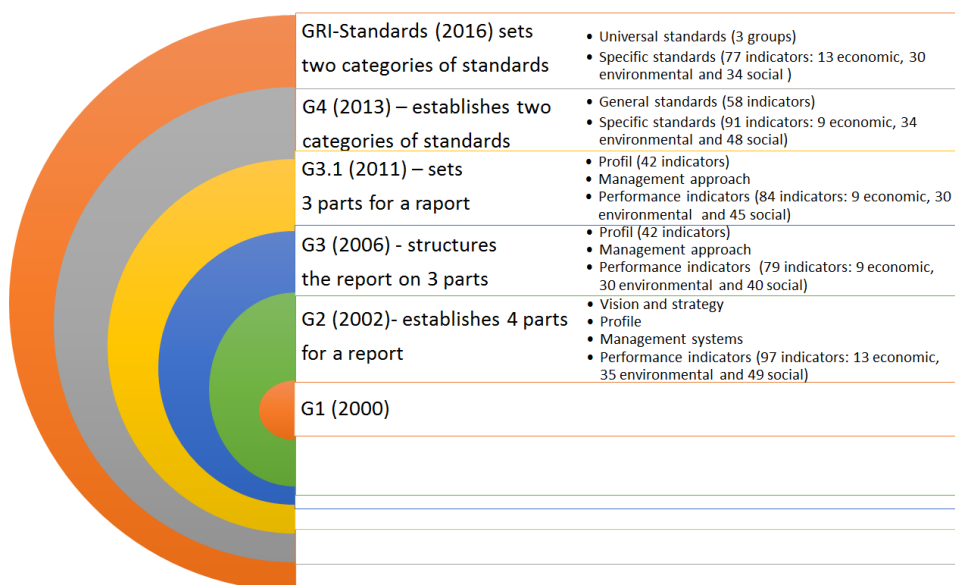


Figure 1. The GRI referential evolution

Source: GRI 2, 2002, pp. 44-56; GRI 3, 2006, pp. 20-36; GRI 3.1, 2011, pp. 20-39; GRI 4, 2013, pp. 18-235; GRI Standards, 2016, p. 3

Being a non-profit organization, GRI has been benefiting from the active participation of representatives of businesses, multinational corporations, non-profit organizations, governments, academics, etc. In fact, through their active involvement and public debates, the GRI standards are revised periodically, thereby achieving an improvement over previous regulations, offering an easier use and more relevant, comparable and verifiable indicators. Being a voluntary reporting, the revision of GRI has included, since G3, levels of certifications which are presented in evolution in table 1.

Table 1. Types of GRI certification

GRI referential	Certification level	Minimum information to be published
G3	A	All indicators for part I: Profile (42) All indicators for part II: Management Approach All main performance indicators (core) and the one specific to the sector according to the material topics: 7 Economic, 17 Environment, 25 Social
	A+	The published data are certified by an external valuer
	B	All indicators for part I: Profile (42) All indicators for part II: Management Approach At least 20 performance indicators, at least one from each category: Economic, Environment, Labor Practices and Decent Work, Human Rights, Society, Product Responsibility
	B+	The published data are certified by an external valuer
	C	28 indicators for part I: Profile (28) No indicator for part II: Management Approach At least 10 performance indicators, at least one from each category: Economic, Environment, Social
	C+	The published data are certified by an external valuer
G3.1	A	All indicators for part I: Profile (42) All indicators for part II: Management Approach All performance indicators and the one specific to the sector according to the material topics: (the reason of omission must be justified)

GRI referential	Certification level	Minimum information to be published
	A+	The published data are certified by an external valuer
	B	All indicators for part I: Profile (42) All indicators for part II: Management Approach At least 20 performance indicators, at least one from each category: Economic, Environment, Labor Practices and Decent Work, Human Rights, Society, Product Responsibility
	B+	The published data are certified by an external valuer
	C	28 indicators for part I: Profile(28) No indicator for part II: Management Approach At least 10 performance indicators, at least one from each category: Economic, Environment, Social
	C+	The published data are certified by an external valuer
<b>G4</b>	In accordance- Comprehensive	General Standard Disclosure (23 indicators: G4-35 - G4-55 and G4-57 – G4-58) In exceptional cases, if it is not possible to disclose certain required information, an entity must provide the reason for omission Specific Standard Disclosure: 9 Economic, 34 Environment, 16 Labor Practices and Decent Work, 12 Human Rights, 11 Society, 9 Product Responsibility
	In accordance - Core	General Standard Disclosure (58 indicators) In exceptional cases, if it is not possible to disclose certain required information, an entity must provide the reason for omission Specific Standard Disclosure: 9 Economic, 34 Environment, 16 Labor Practices and Decent Work, 12 Human Rights, 11 Society, 9 Product Responsibility
<b>GRI Standards</b> (applicable since 2018)	In accordance- Comprehensive	GRI 101 - all GRI 102- all (omissions are permitted to 102.17, 102.19-102.39) GRI 103 – all (omissions are permitted to 103.2-103.3) GRI 200, 300, 400-all reporting requirements Management approach Disclosures and all the requirements for all topic-specific disclosure. Reasons for omission are permitted for all topic-specific disclosures
	In accordance - Core	GRI 101 - all GRI 102 - 102.1-102.14,102.16, 102.18, 102.40-102.45, 102.56 GRI 103 - all (omissions are permitted to 103.2-103.3) GRI 200, 300, 400- all reporting requirements Management approach Disclosures and at least one indicator for the specific aspects. Reasons for omission are permitted for all topic-specific disclosures

Source: GRI 3, 2006, application level- p. 2, GRI 3.1, 2011, application level- p. 2, GRI 4, 2013, pp. 46-50, GRI Standards, 2016, GRI 101- p. 23

These options are not related to the quality of published information or to the extent of the organization impact, but they reflect the extent to which the GRI standards were applied. It is not necessary for an organization to move from one certification level to another, but it can choose the option which best suits their reporting needs and the information needs of the stakeholders.

## 2. Literature Review

GRI reports contain information on the economic, environmental and social aspects of a company. This approach is also known as Triple Bottom Line Reporting (GRI, 2006, p. 3), incorporating the three “p” (people, planet and profit). Adopting GRI is the result of a voluntary approach but, according to the 2015 KPMG study, 92% of reports published by Global250 entities and 73% of N100 companies contain information according to GRI (KPMG, 2015, p. 30). This aspect is also underlined

in literature (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2014, p. 331; Skouloudis et al., 2009, p. 298; Prado-Lorenzo et al., 2009, p. 94; Tsang et al., 2009, p. 123; Rasche, 2009, p. 192; Levy et al., 2010, p. 108; Roca & Searcy, 2012, p. 116; Christofi et al., 2012, p. 169; Marimon et al., 2012, p. 142). Thus, numerous studies have found that *polluting firms* (Mitchell & Hill, 2009, p. 48; Gamerschlag et al., 2011, p. 233; Toppinen et al., 2012, p. 191) published more environmental information, according to GRI referential. Clarkson et al. (2008, p. 325) identified a positive correlation between *environmental performance* and GRI reporting for 191 companies of the US five most polluting industrial sectors (pulp and paper, chemicals, oil and gas, metals and mining, and utilities), and Margolis et al. (2007, p. 4) identified a positive relationship between *sustainable reporting and financial performance*, studying the profitability based on a meta-analysis on 167 articles/studies. Similar results were obtained by Gamerschlag et al. (2011, p. 233) who identified, by analyzing 130 German listed companies, the tendency of the profitable companies to provide more environmental information. Another identified issue is that, most often, GRI reporting is used by companies with proactive environmental strategies, as a tool to inform users because environmental performance is not easy and directly observable. Thus, the sectors with chemical processes seem to be aware of their potential environmental impact, providing information on the environmental consequences and on the improvements in their operations (Noronha et al., 2012, p. 41). The sector in which a company operates also influences the type and number of indicators that are published (Gallego, 2006, p. 78; Guthrie & Franeti, 2008, p. 365). Also, the sectors with powerful regulation frameworks such as oil, gas and mine (Guenther et al., 2006, p. 7; Fonseca, 2010, p. 355), utilities (Mio, 2010, p. 247) adopted GRI referential in a more complex manner (Tsang et al., 2009, p. 135). Adopting GRI occurred earlier and faster in those sectors with higher risk on environment (Legendre & Coderre, 2013, p. 182; Tsang et al., 2009, p. 132) and with higher visibility on the capital markets (Callan & Thomas, 2009, p. 61), identifying a significant relationship between market capitalization and the information disclosure on sustainable development according to GRI (Schadewitz & Niskala, 2010, p. 96). The relevance and importance of performance indicators for sustainability, perceived by two groups of stakeholder (those who publish reports and their users) have been analyzed by Lin et al. (2014, p. 29) for G3 referential. The authors found that, in general, both groups agreed with the indicators proposed by the GRI 3 guidelines.

Prado-Lorenzo et al. (2009, p. 105) underlined that GRI requires the reporting of economics, environmental and social information, whether such information have a negative impact on the company. According to this reasoning, Schadewitz and Niskala (2010, p. 105) stated that GRI is one of the most important communication tools for reducing asymmetric information between organizations on one side, and investors and other stakeholders, on the other side.

Being voluntary, GRI reporting faced criticism regarding its purpose, the lack of a requirement to verify the reports and that self-certification levels allow pinning specific performance indicators (Moneva et al., 2006, p. 121; Brown et al., 2009, p. 571; Roca & Searcy, 2012, p. 115). Knebel and Seele (2013, p. 208) analyzed 177 reports that were certified A+, identifying empirical evidence on the reporting deficiency regarding the completeness, accessibility and comparability. Their findings allow identifying potential areas in which non-financial reporting can be improved in terms of accessibility and possibility for comparative assessment. Another aspect considered was the need to examine the concept of materiality, set by G4 because it leaves to the organization the option to report all the indicators or some of them. Thus, there are companies which report all the indicators (favorable or not) and others which published only favorable information. Same criticism on GRI, regarding its failure to promote sustainable development, is also made by Milne and Gray (2013, p. 24). Therefore,

the overall challenge is to adopt GRI standards, but also to respond to the need for comparability, standardization and transparency.

### **3. Voluntary Reporting: is it a Problem or a Solution for the Non-Profit Organizations Image?**

GRI has developed a set of performance key-measures applicable to all entities, sets of specific measures applicable for certain types of businesses and a unitary framework for reporting the information regarding the social, environmental and economic performance of an entity. The indicators have as purpose to present *both the positive and the negative aspects* regarding the elements demanded by the GRI referential. An important aspect of relating the performance indicators for sustainable development with the financial conventional reporting is represented by the need of correlating the terms used in voluntary reporting with the ones from financial reports. The information regarding the sustainable development should be presented for the same unities of analysis (business entities, segments and geographical coverage) as the ones from the financial reports. The information can become even more useful when is placed in the context of the sector's specific standards (situation applicable also to the non-profit organizations).

Adopting voluntary reporting is influenced by many factors, the most significant being: improving the image in the eyes of investors and other stakeholders, awareness for environmental protection, involvement in society, the way in which the economic added value is allocated for social activities. However, we must understand the fact that any supplementary reporting is time consuming and needs supplementary resources, which determined the maintaining of the sustainable development in the voluntary area. The reports regarding the sustainability become more and more ordinary because they recognize the benefits of resource economy, of labor treatment, of the engagement in the community, having as consequence the improvement of reputation and public image. On that context, the present paper proposes on drawing the attention to the non-profit organizations and to their availability to adopt the voluntary reporting because, by definition, they are orientated to the "public good". Therefore, we advocate for the benefits of voluntary reporting (in this case the GRI principles) because we consider that the sustainable reporting is not only beneficial to the non-profits organizations but also to the communities in which they operate, drawing attention over the need for transparency, accountability and realistic assessment of the positive or negative impact which they have not only over the beneficiaries but also on the environment and society. The study will show that, in 2015, none of non-profit organizations from Romania was included on the organization's website.

### **4. Research Methodology**

*The purpose* of this paper is to present the situation of GRI's reporting for the case of non-profit organizations, at global level, in Europe and in European Union.

Starting from the GRI database, updated at April 3, 2017, an analysis of the voluntary reporting for the non-profit organizations will be made, taking into consideration, on one hand, the dimension of the reporting entities (multinational, large and small and medium), and on the other hand, the referential applicable in the reporting process for the 2010-2016 period of time. It should be noted that 2010 is the first year when on the GRI's website were uploaded reports of non-profit organizations.

For 2016, the reports are quite a few, due to the fact that the organizations are still in the reporting period of time. Starting from the information offered by the GRI platform, we will use the *quantitative analysis* for the data that we will present further on. Also the forecasting analysis will be used to provide a picture on the NPOs reporting in the near future, for the period 2016-2020.

## 5. Results and Findings

The starting point for our study was the analysis of the GRI's reports, taken from the database of the organization, updated on April 3, 2017. Given its complexity, we considered as suggestive a presentation of the GRI reporting evolution of non-profits organizations, from two perspectives: on the one hand, taking into account the size of the reporting entities, and on the other hand, the applied GRI referential. Regarding the size of the reporting entities, the criteria outlined in Table 2 were taken into account. These criteria are published by the European Union and are used as references in the GRI database, being subject to modification if national regulations have different specifications.

**Table 2. Criteria for the NPOs classification in terms of size**

Type of entity	Headcount	Turnover OR	Balance sheet total
SME	< 250	≤ 50 million euros	≤ 43million euros
Large	≥ 250	> 50 million euros	> 43million euros
MNE	≥ 250 and multinational	> 50 million euros	> 43million euros

Source: GRI 4, 2011, Sustainability Disclosure Database, p .6.

After analyzing the reports from the GRI database, we considered a total of 874 reports, published for the period 2010-2016 (Table 3, Figure 2), out of which 457 reports were published by non-profit organizations in Europe (Table 4, Figure 3). Europe has always encouraged the actions on sustainable development, aspect confirmed by the fact that, 52.2% of all NPOs which publish information on the GRI website are from Europe. However, until April 3, 2017, any non-profit organization from Romania hasn't published a report respecting the GRI referential.

**Table 3. Number of reports uploaded on GRI's website (total)**

Year	Total NPOs reports	Large	MNE	SME
2010	109	39	3	67
2011	132	42	9	81
2012	153	50	12	91
2013	163	61	13	89
2014	160	64	8	88
2015	143	60	7	76
2016	14	3	1	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>874</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>502</b>

Source: GRI database for 2010-2017 (GRI-Reports-List-Complete, updated at April 3, 2017)

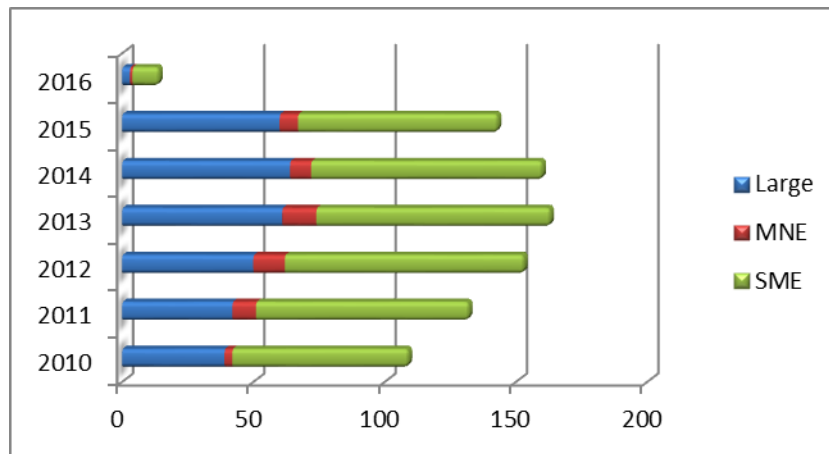


Figure 2. Number of GRI reports published by NPOs for 2010-2016

Table 4. Number of reports uploaded on GRI’s website (Europe)

Year	Total NPOs reports	Large	MNE	SME
2010	57	22	1	34
2011	78	23	6	49
2012	83	27	5	51
2013	81	25	7	49
2014	84	29	7	48
2015	70	25	3	42
2016	4	1	1	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>275</b>

Source: GRI database for 2010-2017 (GRI-Reports-List-Complete, updated at April 3, 2017)

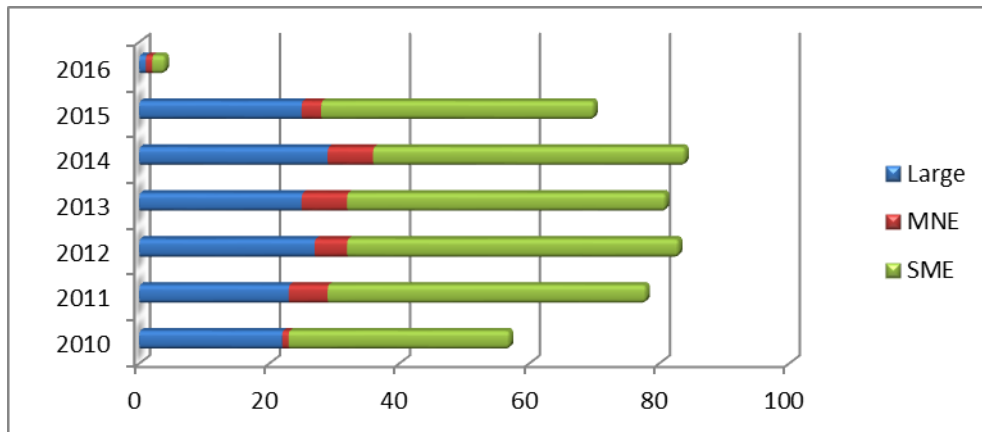


Figure 3. Number of GRI reports published by European NPOs for 2010-2016

Starting from the total number of European NPOs which published GRI reports, we considered important to identify how many of these are from the European Union (EU). Thus, it was found that only 15% of them are from outside the EU. In fact, the only countries that have uploaded reports on GRI’s website and which are not part of the EU are Norway, Switzerland and the Russian Federation (Table 5).



**Table 5. Number of reports uploaded on GRI website (Europe), from a territorial perspective**

Year	Total NPOs reports	EU	Non-EU
2010	57	52	5
2011	78	66	12
2012	83	69	14
2013	81	68	13
2014	84	70	14
2015	70	59	11
2016	4	4	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>69</b>

Source: GRI database for 2010-2017 (GRI-Reports-List-Complete, updated at April 3, 2017)

Taking into account that in the considered reporting period many GRI referential were applicable (G3, G3.1, G4), the annual number of reports on each GRI version applicable at the time, on type of certification, was selected. As we already specified, the certification is self-declared and is dependent on the number of published indicators (A, B, C for G3.1 and G3). Also, if they are verified by an external valuer, the certification receives a + (plus). No non-profit organizations reported in 2016 according to GRI-Standards (until April 3, 2017, there were only two private companies). In fact, the referential will be applicable from 2018, but its early application is encouraged. Table 6 shows the global situation and Table 7, the situation at the EU level. Globally, only 10.75% are verified by an external valuer, the situation being close in Europe (8.3%).

**Table 6. Number of reports uploaded on GRI website (total), according to the applied referential**

GRI REFERENTIAL		Year							TOTAL
		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	
G3	A	10	3	3	3	2			21
	A+	5	6	6	4	1			22
	B	12	10	8	5	1			36
	B+	5	5	6	3				19
	C	39	26	20	11	4			100
	C+	4	6	4	2	2			18
	Undeclared	9	8	10	4				31
G3.1	A	1	8	6	1				16
	A+	1	4	2	1	1			9
	B	1	7	14	13	4			39
	B+			3	4	3			10
	C	2	10	16	10	5	1		44
	C+		2	9	3	2			16
	Undeclared		1	6	10	7	1		25
G4	In accordance - Core			3	30	52	67	10	162
	In accordance - Comprehensive				5	8	14		27
	Undeclared				5	15	10		30
CITING GRI		8	9	9	12	12	11		61
NON-GRI		12	27	28	37	41	39	4	188
<b>TOTAL NPOs</b>		<b>109</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>874</b>

Source: GRI database for 2010-2017 (GRI-Reports-List-Complete, updated at April 3, 2017)



Table 7. Number of reports uploaded on GRI website (Europe), according to the applied referential

GRI REFERENTIAL		Year							TOTAL
		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	
G3	A	5	2	1	2	1			11
	A+	5	3	2	2				12
	B	6	4	5	4				19
	B+	2	3	1	1				7
	C	23	14	12	8	4			61
	C+	2	2	3	1	2			10
	Undeclared	2	4	5	1				12
G3.1	A	1	6	4	1				12
	A+		3	1					4
	B	1	3	6	2	1			13
	B+			1	2	1			4
	C	1	7	10	4	3	1		26
	C+		1	6	2	2			11
	Undeclared		1	2	2	2	1		8
G4	In accordance - Core			2	16	27	30	1	76
	In accordance - Comprehensive				3	4	6		13
	Undeclared				1	6	4		11
CITING GRI		5	6	6	8	2	8		35
NON-GRI		4	19	16	21	29	20	3	112
TOTAL NPOs in Europe		57	78	83	81	84	70	4	457

Source: GRI database for 2010-2017 (GRI-Reports-List-Complete, updated at April 3, 2017)

Starting on data published on the GRI website for the period 2010-2015, the evolution in the number of reports that will be uploaded in 2016-2020 was forecasted. Globally and for Europe, the situation is presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Forecasting of the number of reports that will be uploaded on GRI website (total and Europe) on 2016-2020

Worldwide				
Year	TOTAL NPOs	Large	MNE	SME
2010	109	39	3	67
2011	132	42	9	81
2012	153	50	12	91
2013	163	61	13	89
2014	160	64	8	88
2015	143	60	7	76
2016	169,73	64,36	10,37	85,93
2017	177,28	67,70	10,85	87,05
2018	178,19	68,96	10,06	85,48
2019	179,72	68,15	9,71	85,26
2020	184,53	69,09	10,21	85,79
TOTAL	1749,45	654,26	103,20	921,51
Europe				
Year	TOTAL NPOs	Large	MNE	SME
2010	57	22	1	34
2011	78	23	6	49

Worldwide				
Year	TOTAL NPOs	Large	MNE	SME
2012	83	27	5	51
2013	81	25	7	49
2014	84	29	7	48
2015	70	25	3	42
2016	83,60	26,67	5,66	47,47
2017	85,91	27,09	5,90	48,03
2018	82,78	26,55	5,73	47,89
2019	82,72	26,83	5,71	47,76
2020	84,09	27,04	5,93	47,52
TOTAL	872,11	285,17	57,93	511,68

*Source: GRI database for 2010-2017 (GRI-Reports-List-Complete, updated at April 3, 2017) and own processing*

GRI reports show how an organization acted in time and what is its impact on society, environment, employees, by voluntarily describing fundamental aspects regarding its social status. The reports must be easy readable. Each organization is unique, and of course, GRI and other standards attempt to address exactly this aspect, but the long lists of considered indicators do not stimulate the innovation.

Generally, the organizations need to focus on important business issues and on its stakeholders. The good news is that GRI offered an iteration of the G4 previous version. The amendments focus on *material topics*, in particular, and on the identification of the issues that really matter to organizations and stakeholders. By seeking consensus between the expectations of the stakeholders and the will of the companies to disclose both their positive and negative information, GRI continues to improve its reporting framework.

## 6. Conclusions

Over time, the GRI referential has become synonymous with good reporting practices. GRI guidelines have become the most widely used voluntary reporting framework for sustainable development. However, we must bear in mind that the specific of the activities is essential and that a company must see transparency more as a tool than as a constraint. The aim of this paper was to explore the literature regarding sustainability reporting frameworks, to catalogue various typologies of reporting frameworks published by GRI, to investigate the motivation of the non-profit organizations to adopt such frameworks, and to identify the extent of their use in the world and in Europe. As a consequence, we noticed that the GRI referential has a steady evolution, adapting itself to the global evolution of economies. However, there are voice in both businesses and academic environment who criticize GRI for imposing specific indicators, stepping, this way, over the boundaries of a voluntary disclosure.

Regarding the number of non-profit organizations which uploaded their GRI reports on organization's website, there is no noticeable increase from 2010 to 2016. Actually, we have to acknowledge the fact that there is no preoccupation of the NPOs to report on their social activities. A more analytical view on the reports shows that 22 European companies have reported constantly from 2010-2015, while 18 companies have published their GRI reports from 2011. The rest of them have uploaded sporadically, which is a sign of a lack of interest in the voluntary reporting.

In our opinion, this situation is due to two factors. One, the NPOs consider themselves as being part of the social good, so there is no need for them to supplement the financial reports, which already contain information about their non-profit activities, with other disclosures having the same nature. Second, disclosing some negative aspects regarding their activity could repel donors and volunteers, so it's a choice between funds and transparency. Anyway, the NPOs which published their reports adapted themselves to the evolution of the GRI frameworks, which is a positive fact. In fact, the real challenge in adopting GRI referential is to see the reporting as a process and not as a constraint which dictates the strategy to be followed.

## 7. Acknowledgements

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