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The role of public relations professionals in corporate social responsibility: some notes from the Portuguese reality

O papel dos profissionais de relações públicas na responsabilidade social corporativa: algumas notas a partir da realidade portuguesa

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THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS IN CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSABILITY: SOME NOTES FROM THE PORTUGUESE REALITY

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ABSTRACT

Are public relations (PR) professionals involved in the decision-making processes concerning corporate citizenship (CC) or are they only asked to report the organizations' best practices? Are organizations committed to corporate social responsibility (CSR) or corporate citizenship? In the framework of a pragmatist paradigm, a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach was developed. This method is a two-phase design that is characterized by an initial quantitative phase of data collection and analysis, followed by a qualitative phase of data collection and analysis. An invitation to answer an online survey was sent to all 158 organizations that belonged to an association for the promotion of CSR in Portugal (Grace), in October 2018. Afterwards, face-to-face interviews with the CSR/CC responsible were conducted to those organizations that answered the survey. The research showed that the social (philanthropic) area emerged as the most relevant one in all the organizations interviewed, even though the area seems to be under strong reformulations. Corporations tend to choose CSR as the main concept and dislike the concept of corporate citizenship, that is, the idea of being both a social and political actor. PR practitioners seem to have fewer responsibilities than those the researchers expected to find out, at least at a strategic level.

KEYWORDS

public relations; corporate citizenship; corporate social responsibility

O PAPEL DOS PROFISSIONAIS DE RELAÇÕES PÚBLICAS NA RESPONSABILIDADE SOCIAL CORPORATIVA: ALGUMAS NOTAS A PARTIR DA REALIDADE PORTUGUESA

RESUMO

Os profissionais de relações públicas (RP) são envolvidos nos processos de decisão sobre cidadania corporativa (CC) ou apenas são chamados a divulgar as práticas das organizações a este nível? As organizações estão comprometidas com a responsabilidade social corporativa (RSC) ou com a cidadania corporativa? No âmbito de um paradigma pragmatista, foi desenvolvida uma abordagem explicativa sequencial recorrendo a métodos mistos. Foi realizada uma investigação em duas fases, uma fase inicial quantitativa de recolha e análise de dados, e de

seguida uma fase de recolha e análise de dados qualitativa. Em outubro de 2018, foram convidadas a responder a um inquérito online as 158 organizações que pertencem a uma associação portuguesa para a promoção da CC (Grace). Posteriormente, foram realizadas entrevistas presenciais com o responsável pela RSC/CC organizações que responderam ao questionário. O estudo aponta para que a área social (filantrópica) seja a mais relevante nas organizações entrevistadas e que esta área da RSC está sob fortes reformulações. No entanto, as organizações parecem não utilizar o conceito de cidadania corporativa. Ao contrário do esperado pelos investigadores, os profissionais de comunicação parecem não assumir responsabilidades a nível estratégico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

relações públicas; cidadania corporativa; responsabilidade social corporativa

INTRODUCTION

The option for the concept of “corporate citizenship” (CC) (Woot, 2013, 2016) in the context of this project is not altogether innocent. By using it in detriment of some other notions as those of “enterprise social responsibility” or “corporate social responsibility” (CRS), the authors wish to emphasize their concern with aspects others than those that could be subsumed under the idea of hands-out philanthropy. In general terms, CSR can be defined as the ways in which corporations are voluntarily responsible to and for society in broad terms (Matten & Moon, 2008). Assuming the possibility of some overlapping of the concepts, the concept of CC will also be discussed. Corporate citizenship should be understood here as encompassing some activities, that in the last three decades emerged as being important for companies that we can consider as entering the sphere of the political, addressing diseases in Africa or boycotting South-Africa during the apartheid.

Moreover, the discussion concerning the real status of CSR/CC in Portugal has not been done yet. In a certain sense we are still living in a post Friedman (1970) era where both business persons and politicians tend to consider, or at least that is their official statement, that public affairs should be left to politician and public officials. In a country where the influence of neo-corporatist institutional structures still have such a great power, corporations tend to deny, however, in quite a vehement way, their involvement in political life. However, it is not this paper’s purpose to discuss this concept and its philosophical implications. Its use here is only due to the fact that the authors wanted to understand in senses others than the most common accepted ones, the motives, purposes and implications of organizations with the public good. Also, a special interest was taken in those organizations that consider themselves as preoccupied with being responsible towards the planet and the people, beyond the best well known Friedman’s (1970) idea that their level of liability was to generate profit for the shareholders, and therefore belong to a specific association that has as its mission to promote “corporate citizenship” as is explicitly stated in Grace mission.

The main research questions are precisely what do the organizations that belong to the Portuguese association for the development of corporate citizenship (Grace), define

as being their main social responsible principles, policies and practices. The association congregates 158 organizations from both the private and non-governmental sectors, as well as some state-owned enterprises. How do organizations define CSR/CC? Are they mainly concerned with economic, social or environmental issues? Is reputation, a good name, their main preoccupation? What publics are involved in CSR activities? Is CC/CSR a planned process? What is, and what do the organizations think it will be, the main role of communication professionals in the near future in the development and implementation of better and more responsible policies?

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND THE CONCEPTS OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CORPORATE CITIZENSHIP

Paraphrasing Woot (2016), facing the contemporary reality, in these last years of the second decade of the XXI century, in a world that so many designate under the acronym VUCA (volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous), it seems urgent to rethink not only of a new political paradigm, a new way of life for all of us, but also to rethink of the responsibility of our organizations, our institutions, our corporations in improving the lives of so many people around the world and, of course, in preserving the planet, our common home. In this paper against so many ideas that tend to consider the concepts of public relations (PR) or institutional communication as mere instrumental contributors to the report function of so many organizations, authors consider communication as constitutive of the organizations and of all the human practices and tend to see, as well, the PR functions as being pervasive to all organizational levels from the operational to the managerial and strategic one (Dozier, 1992; Steyn & Puth, 2000).

Rather than the notion of mission or vision, it is the notion of purpose that guides organizational practices and performances and positions them in global ecosystems as partners with other companies or entities from other sectors. In this context the concept of “corporate social responsibility (CSR)” must be understood in a sense where the notions of sustainability or accountability will be as more fruitful and genuine as they will be more intertwined with the organization’s purpose and inscribed in the organization’s DNA. The neo-capitalist society that led to the financial crisis of 2007/08 in our democratic eastern countries challenged the way stakeholders see and understand corporations. Today, companies must regain values that have been lost for a few decades and that lead them to assume their role as citizens in communities, with their rights and duties, as each and every one of us (Moon, 2014). The choice we made for the notion of “corporate citizenship” is intentional, a concept that emerges in recent years as rescuing some of the ideas prevailing in western societies before the neoliberal turn of the last decades of the 20th century. The idea of “corporate citizenship” is used in today’s world by large organizations, and there is also a publication dedicated exclusively to the theme, *The Journal of Corporate Citizenship* (quarterly magazine published in the United Kingdom)¹. In the perspective of the first publisher of this publication, “true corporate

¹ Ver <https://www.jstor.org/journal/jcorpciti>

citizenship involves much more than what has traditionally been called CSR” (Waddock 2003, p. 3). This notion still has other contours due to the global dimension of many multinational companies and questions concerning the way these companies deal with suppliers, with producers, so many times belonging to the most disadvantaged regions in the world, for instance. The concept of CC seems to be a more powerful one than the CSR one encompassing actions towards the development and well-being of society beyond the ideas of voluntary actions by organizations, it assumes the idea that corporations may see themselves as broad societal change-agents by acting as citizens towards governments or other companies.

Probably nothing better represents the world we live in as the expression the “butterfly effect”. Both in a literal and metaphorical sense, this expression that reproduces one of the fundamental principles of chaos theory, reminds us that the social and environmental problems are the greatest challenges posed to organizations today and that both are global dilemmas. If the pollution of rivers or oceans has no borders, the precariousness to use the expression that Standing (2011, 2014) enshrined, with which the new generations will be confronted, is also a concept with no geographical boundaries. As Hulme and Arun (2009) have put it so well, in this new century where all processes are complex and relationships are constantly changing, it will depend on the capacity of interaction between the private sector, the public sector and civil society to support both growth capacity building and to meet social/environmental needs.

The companies are asked to assume themselves as citizens of this global world, with their rights, and their duties (Santos & Eiró-Gomes, 2016, 2017). To paraphrase Patten (2005) in a theoretical framework that we can call an “ethics of duty” a clearly modern paradigm, to act well is, in the end, to act in our best interest. In 2001 the European Commission in its Green Paper on this subject made it very clear that the concept – at the time called corporate social responsibility – should be understood as a concept representing social, environmental and economic concerns in its interactions with all stakeholders on a voluntary basis. If you want, this is the key word. When a company has inclusion policies, emits less CO₂, or pays fairly to its suppliers, when it refuses production chains where child labor exists, or when it promotes wage policies that reduce pay scales because it believes that this is how it should act, here we can talk about CSR. If the concept of CSR goes back to the end of the 19th century, with what is generally referred to as Christian-inspired philanthropy (Tirole, 2016), in the late decades of the 20th century, it entails three broad, non-mutually exclusive lines: a sustainable vision, delegated philanthropy and business philanthropy (Tirole, 2016). In the specific context of corporate communications authors such as Argenti (2007) speak of CSR, understanding the role of the communication departments as promoters and “reporters” of responsible business optics, stressing the triad reputation, communication and CSR. Precursors of much of what the best has been written in public relations, as early as 1995, White and Mazur wrote about the importance of PR in establishing community relations; relations that presupposed the development of mutually beneficial partnerships between organizations and their surroundings from a long-term perspective.

Prout (1997) also inscribes the CSR issues in the field of community relations, which is also more or less the same idea recently advocated by Wilcox, Cameron and Xifra (2012). It should be noted, however, that even if the authors use the concepts of “corporate philanthropy” and “environmental relations” they do not use it exactly as we would envisage, that is, with a dimension of proficuous and egalitarian relationships among all those concerned. We should also emphasize the inclusion of some other quite common concepts when we talk about communication and CSR, namely, concepts such as those of reputation (Stangis & Smith, 2017) or crisis communication (Herzig & Kuhn, 2017; Whelan, 2017). In a perspective closer to what we can call an African school and privileging notions such as “social investment” authors such as Skinner or Lessen (Skinner, Essen, Mersham & Motau, 2007) cannot be neglected special as they also allow the proper reconfiguration of some other disciplines such as the one of public relations (Eiró-Gomes & Lourenço, 2009; Lourenço, 2009). In recent years and against our best judgment there seem to be emerging some trends in public relations that tend to create new concepts and new areas of specialization. Some authors and professionals may perceive the concept of “CSR communication” as a new field in public relations / Corporative communication, which may be seen as an action of the general policies of CSR and institutional communication, with merely operative functions. This goes against the idea of a strategic and constitutive vision of public relations and of organizational communication (Dozier, 1992; Steyn & Puth, 2000). As Steyn and Puth (2000) put it, this role is one of “monitoring relevant environmental developments and anticipating their consequences for the organization’s policies and strategies, especially with regard to relationships with stakeholders” (p. 20).

It seems that the PR function will never get rid of the less proficuous aspects of its history notably the way it was seen as just “windows-dressing”. Never as in the last decades the concepts of “greenwashing” or “window-dressing” have been put in so much use to speak about PR and the so many organizations that did not respect all that is expected from them and should configure theirs CSR practices: labor standards, respect for human rights and climate change. Expressions as those of “it is just PR”, or “just PR manoeuvres” to label CSR practices as they are reported in owned, paid or even earned media are common among common citizens. These issues were quite relevant while framing this research as very little is known about how state-owned and particularly private companies in Portugal deal with not only the CSR issues but peculiarly with the role of communication in promoting, developing or reporting their activities. A not minor aspect is precisely the lack of trust in both the private and public sector organizations, that seems pervasive a bit all over the world as well as how that lack of trust is impacting the way PR practitioners are seen and their work understood in the most diverse organizations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In the framework of a pragmatist worldview, a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach was developed. The sequential explanatory approach is one of the three

kinds of mixed methods basic designs proposed by Creswell (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) concomitantly with the convergent parallel and the exploratory sequential. In the case of the convergent parallel mixed method design the qualitative and quantitative data are treated in parallel and compared in order to see if the findings confirm or refute each other, while in the exploratory one the quantitative data collection and analysis follows the qualitative phase aiming to a future possible generalization of the findings.

In the case of the sequential explanatory, the qualitative findings help to explain the quantitative results and offer an in-depth understanding of the situation under investigation. This is a two-phase design that is characterized by an initial quantitative phase of data collection and analysis, followed by a phase of qualitative data collection and analysis. If it is true that the first results help framing the kind of qualitative questions that must be asked to participants it is important to note that one of the most relevant aspects of this kind of inquiry is that the qualitative findings help to confirm and explain the data found during the quantitative phase.

An invitation to answer an online survey was sent to all the 158 organizations in October 2018. The invitation was sent to the responsible for the department that dealt with questions connected to the general designated CSR area or when not acknowledged by the organization to the public email. The same invitation was sent at least three times more, and always by email, in November and at least three phone calls were attempted to those that did not answer either positively or negatively before considering that those organizations were not available to answer the survey. Only five explicitly declined the invitation. Excepting those questions that dealt with a characterization of the organization that were open-ended all the other questions were closed-ended ones (selected-response questions). A great care was taken while constructing them in order to ensure the responses were mutually exclusive, except in the case of the multiple responses possibility cases, as well as that they were clear, short and used an easily understood language. The questions were organized in six groups covering six main areas in accordance with the research questions and sub-questions.

As it is quite common to misunderstand and misinterpret this type of questions a pilot study was developed, and the instruments were tested in a small group of volunteers and all the corrections due necessities introduced. The cover letter with the explanation of the study as well as the instructions for its fulfilment were also tested. According to the preconized method for a sequential mixed methods approach analysis proceed independently for each phase. A content quantitative analysis of the 43 surveys received were developed. Afterwards, and as not all of those that answered the survey were available for the second phase, a new analysis was promoted using only the surveys of those 27 organizations that would be considered in the study.

After the surveys were received all the respondents were contacted first by phone and afterwards by email in order to be interviewed. In January 2019 all those that had not answered (positively or negatively) were contacted at least three times by phone and email before considering that those organizations were not available to be interviewed.

Between November 2018 and January 2019 face-to-face interviews with the CSR/ CC responsible were conducted to those organizations that accepted the invitation to be interviewed.

Interviews (according to an open script) were the research instrument chosen for the second phase as they are a useful form of data collection allowing the exploration of the perspectives and perceptions of the interviewees (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Researchers used this kind of data collection method precisely in order to gather information about all the aspects concerning CSR/CC and public relations (corporate communication) work in these organizations in an in-depth way. These participants were asked to define CSR and CC in their own terms and to discuss their thoughts about how the concepts were understood in their firms. Moreover, participants were asked which one in general used concepts seemed to represent in a better way each organizational practice. A great interest was put on understanding how these actors saw the role of the communication professionals, their competences and capacities, how decision-making processes were conducted in relation to the design of the CSR/CC policies and practices and the specific role of the communication specialists in developing and (or) reporting the mentioned policies and practices.

Researchers used this kind of data collection method precisely in order to gather information about all the aspects previously mentioned. A total of 27 interviews were conducted, each lasting between 30 and 120 minutes, the mode being situated in an hour. Generally, only one person was interviewed per organization but in two cases even though the main respondent was the CSR/CC coordinator other person was present during the interview. In the discussion of the themes, organizations (in the few cases of more than one respondent per organization no distinction between them will be made) will be referred to using numbers. All the interviews were verbatim transcribed. Only at the end of all the interviews did the researchers read the transcripts and get the sense of the overall data collected as well as reflected on its overall meaning.

One of the main objectives in data analysis in qualitative research is to reduce the volume of raw material and aggregate the data into certain categories in accordance to the research goals in order to be able to communicate the essence of what the data revealed. Therefore, a qualitative content analysis was developed starting with the definition of the coding frame. A coding frame, or as it might be less misleading a classification frame (Seidman, 2013) is a way of structuring the material under analysis. It consists of major categories, also called dimensions, specifying the most relevant aspects, and subcategories for each major category, detailing themes and meanings related to each one of the main dimensions (Schreier, 2012). The main categories are the aspects in which the analysis will be focused. The subcategories, in turn, reflect what the material exhibits about the main categories. The categories have been defined in a concept-driven way based in both the literature review as well as a previous floating documental analysis. They express also the interests of the researchers. As Seidman (2013) puts it in reducing the material interviewers have begun to analyze, interpret, and make meaning of it. The subcategories however were only defined after having read all the material transcribed in

what is in general designated as data-driven way. The data-driven strategy is inductive as it generates the sub-categories in accordance with the information present in the material under review.

The concept driven strategy is in general understood as being a deductive process where the categories are defined according to the previous literature review and the research questions that in certain sense express the purposes of the investigation. In this kind of work and to use the words of Schreier (2012) it is often useful to use simultaneous concept and data driven categories. That was precisely the researcher's decision. Under each of the main dimensions and when relevant some sub-categories were open in an inductive process, that is, they emerged from the object.

It is usually understood that if the aim of the research is to describe in quite a precise and comprehensive way the content of the interviews, as it is in the present case, this is quite an acceptable strategy (Schreier, 2012). As Saldaña (2016) puts it descriptive coding "assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase (...) the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (p. 292). All the material was hand categorized following the methodological prescriptions for this kind of qualitative data analysis. Maybe it is worth recalling that in qualitative analysis the most relevant is not to count occurrences of certain words or phrases but to rearrange the data in organizational categories, or topics (Maxwell, 2013), as some authors prefer to call them, that enable researchers to separate material bearing on a given topic from other data.

When speaking about validity in the realm of a pragmatist perspective and in special in the area of the qualitative research things cannot be understood exactly either in the way they are in the exclusive quantitative research or as they are in the constructivist approaches that deny its possibility. Following Maxwell (2013) the concept is used here in its common sense interpretation to refer to the correctness of the explanations and interpretations offered. Two main aspects are important and have been addressed: the researchers bias and the reactivity of the respondents. Even if unavoidable, researchers were at least conscient of both mentioned problems. The verbatim transcripts of the interviews and the support of a research assistant in doing so, as well as the respondent validations of the data were used to minimize the researchers bias. In order to downplay the reactivity of the respondents leading questions were totally and consciously avoided. Using the mixed methods approach as well as an assessment of public documents in order to confirm data and get a better view of the all context were also ways to reduce the threats to validity.

In the present research considering the qualitative analysis of the data six main categories or dimensions were developed using a concept-driven strategy:

1. corporate social responsibility (CSR)/corporate citizenship (CC) (conceptualizations) – all the words or phrases denoting the labels, a definition or explanation of the concepts;
2. reasons and activities – under this category all the manifest messages that dealt with the motives or the main concerns were considered as the activities/issues included under the CSR responsibility, as volunteering, community relations, work-life balance;
3. publics – all the publics that were called to participate in the CSR policies definition or in CSR activities were considered, as well as the main beneficiary of the actions;

4. CSR management – in this category have been considered all the strategic planning or technical aspects of CSR policies and practices – planning, implementing, budgeting and evaluating;
5. Communication – under this category all the data concern with all the communication/PR role were considered, in accordance with the three levels proposed by different authors (Dozier, 1992; Steyn and Puth, 2000). Three sub-categories have been opened: strategic, managerial; technician;
6. CSR: the way ahead – under this dimension we considered all data associated to future perspectives and concepts, visions, challenges and trends.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The six main categories previously introduced will be used to guide the presentation and discussion of results. Additionally, it is important to refer that even though the qualitative and quantitative data analysis has been done separately, the conclusions will be here presented together.

Concerning the concepts used to make reference to the sustainability commitment there is a wide use of the “corporate social responsibility” concept among the Grace associates. Only in few organizations under study in this research an intentional use of the concept “corporate citizenship” was found. Although, Grace positions itself as a “group of reflection and support to the corporate citizenship”².

In terms of the conceptual definition of CSR given by the organizations, a unanimous answer was not possible to identify. In all definitions introduced, researchers could distinguish between first, the aim/purpose/goal/intention of CSR and, second, the focus/content of the CSR. The corporate social responsibility aims have been described in quite different ways, varying from the classical definition according to the European Commission’ Green Paper (2001, p.7) as the “voluntary integration of corporate social and ecological concerns into their business activities and their relationships with their stakeholders”, to other different intentions. With the same relevance as the “voluntary integration of the CSR concerns”, emerged the purpose “contribute”. Thereafter, the most frequent aims referred were “responsibility”, “social role” and “reduce the impact”. After, two organizations introduced the corporate social responsibility efforts as a “commitment”. Lastly, and being referred just once, arise goals as “concern”, “policy”, “duty”, “requirements integration”, “management method”. There is one concept that is used by some organizations as an aim and simultaneously by others as a focus, namely: “sustainability”.

When focusing on the CSR focus/content, the two most appointed concerns “volunteering initiatives” and “community relations”, thus, we can conclude that the social initiatives emerge as the first preference of the inquired organizations. The third most referred options were “environment” and “diversity. With a higher number of answers than expected emerged the “work-life balance” showing that these kinds of concerns are arising as a priority when exploring the CSR field in organizations. Not surprising is the fact that “salary equity” is the less referred content, showing that there still is a long way to go concerning this relevant, but not yet seriously worked issue.

² Retrieved from <http://www.fmam.pt/imprensa/noticias/tema-1/grace-grupo-de-reflexão-e-apoio-à-cidadania-empresarial/>

Lastly, during the inquiry process, the respondents were asked to nominate one word that they immediately related to corporate social responsibility. Forty-three words were introduced, from which 13 were used more than once and only those were analyzed (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Words introduced as related to corporate social responsibility

Credits: Mafalda Eiró-Gomes and Ana Raposo

Using a cloud of concepts to interpret the data gathered at this point, one main word appeared: “sustainability”. In fact, this concept seems to become more important when someone wants to make reference to the CSR investments. Thereafter, with the same relevance emerged the words “commitment” and “impact”. Interesting is also the fact that the word “citizenship” appeared in a prominent position, as well as “responsibility”.

When questioned about what are the reasons to invest in CSR, the majority appointed “reputation” as the main cause to promote CSR actions. Thereafter, the most chosen option was “consumers demands”. As a matter of fact, we can say that this option expresses a concern directly related to the stakeholder’s perception, enhancing the importance of “reputation” in this context.

At this point, it could be interesting to share some excerpts of the interviews conducted, that due to the number of times they were repeated became relevant. As said before, we have decided to keep quotes anonymous, as their aim is merely to demonstrate trends. One organization said “we chose the projects not only by its importance, but also because of the return on investment that we can have for the organization” (Organization 1). Similarly, other organization stated, “increasingly, the requirements of our clients go that way. (...) For example, we start to have requests related to the national production. (...) Clearly, our economic objectives are aligned with our environmental and sustainability objectives” (Organization 2).

The investors’ interest seems to contribute similarly to the decision to promote CSR actions. Finally, some organizations introduced other reasons to justify their decisions concerning CSR, being the most frequent answers “community and society development” and “employees motivation”.

Relevant is the fact that, even though “Government incentives” was the least referred reason (two times), 17 out of the 27 organizations under study answered “yes” when asked if they employ to Law Patronage.

With regard to the second subcategory of this dimension – CSR content –, the two most highlighted concerns are “voluntary initiatives” and “community relations”, and we can conclude that social initiatives emerge as the first preference of the surveyed organizations. The third most frequently mentioned option was as often “environment” and “diversity”. With a higher number of answers than expected, came the “work-life balance”, showing that this type of concern emerges as a priority within CSR in organizations. Not surprisingly, “wage equity” is the least mentioned, showing that there is still a long way to go on this relevant issue, but not yet seriously worked out.

Under the category number three, it was significant to understand which stakeholders were engaged in CSR initiatives. The organizations under study referred with the same frequency the public “community” and “employees”. Next, “partners” emerged as the third most frequent public introduced. With less prevalence appeared “clients” and “suppliers” and, in the end, the “investors”.

Let’s now focus on issues related to the corporate social responsibility management, namely: planning, implementing, budgeting and evaluation of CSR (category number four). The majority (20 out of 27) of the inquired institutions declared to have a concrete strategic plan for corporate social responsibility. In the same way, when questioned if the CSR issues are part of the global strategic plan of the organization the great majority answered “yes” (24 out of 27). In addition, researchers tried to evaluate if this function could be outsourced, totally or partially, as a complement to the work done in-house. Here the results showed that the organizations under study tend to not work in an outsourcing model in what concerns to CSR consultancy, only nine out of the 27 organizations answered “yes”.

Regarding CSR implementation, the majority of the organizations declared to have regular initiatives (23 out of 27). Additionally, organizations were asked whether there was a specific budget targeting CSR initiatives. The findings showed that this is a sensitive topic for the respondents, avoiding to share details about it. Half of the organizations said to not have a special CSR budget (14 out of 27), therefore the costs with CSR initiatives are assumed by marketing, corporate communications, safety and environment departments.

Even though, “impact” had emerged as one of the most cited words related to CSR by the organizations, the face-to-face interviews were helpful to conclude that there is still room for improvement in terms of impact assessment. In few organizations was possible to find intentional efforts and formal processes to evaluate the impact of the CSR investments. There is a clear notion among the organizations that a different approach is needed: “up to now we didn’t use evaluation metrics. We still don’t have CSR impact evaluation (...). It’s a gap that we have” (Organization 1); “there isn’t (impact evaluation), but it’s our aim to implement it from now on” (Organization 3).

The role of communication in CSR processes had also been explored in this study. Therefore, on a first moment, organizations were questioned about how they communicate the CSR initiatives (technician subcategory). The majority of the respondents declared to use emails and the website to communicate CSR. Next, the intranet, events,

social networks, newsletter and internal publications were referred as relevant instruments to promote those initiatives. The results points to a higher investment in internal communication instruments in what concerns to CSR. Moreover, less than half of the organizations invest in media relations and only three use advertising campaigns to communicate CSR issues. Finally, just one organization viewed the sustainability report as a way to communicate CSR.

In this regard, to understand how CSR activities were reported and publicized, organizations were asked if they have sustainability reports. The results were quite surprising because less than half of the organizations had a specialized CSR report (12 out of 27). This conclusion enhanced the need for a new understanding and more investments to develop sustainability reports.

In order to have a deeper comprehension about the quantitative results and to understand the role of communication in CSR, during the interviews the researchers focus on this specific subject. As the budget, the communication seems to be a sensible issue. Some organizations inclusively stated that CSR efforts should not be communicated – “we only publicize internally. We don’t want people to see CSR investments as brand management” (Organization 4). On the other hand, among organizations with more than ten years of CSR investment, interviewees stated “we’ll start to communicate this year. Our priority is to improve the communication with our employees” (Organization 5). Others stated “internally we publicize CSR a lot. (...) We aim to promote the initiatives among the employees. Externally, we don’t invest much, doesn’t make sense for us to promote it” (Organization 3) or “we only communicate CSR initiatives if it is relevant to the beneficiary, never to promote us” (Organization 6).

Summing up, the role of communication professionals in the majority of the organizations is an instrumental/technical one, related to the CSR implementation and reporting. The qualitative analysis was important to validate this conclusion: “the role of communication isn’t not only to publicize, but also to implement the CSR initiatives” (Organization 1); “communication department is responsible to publicize. (...) In terms of CSR project management communication is not involved. We have a specific CSR department” (Organization 4). As a respondent stated: “the CSR initiatives are a final product delivered to the communication department to disseminate them. There is no strategic role to communication” (Organization 7).

Ultimately, under the dimension number six, the future of CSR has been contemplated. Among the organizations under study, the CSR issue seems to be facing a moment of reorganization and reconstruction. On the one hand, there is a willingness to rethink the way of understanding and managing the CSR. The notion of “sustainability” tends to be used as an umbrella concept to make reference, not only to environmental, but also social and economic issues. On the other, there is a concern with the CSR evaluation and report, through sustainability reports.

The issue of certification processes emerged, not associated to the well-known ISO 26000³, but particularly to the recent family and work conciliation certification. As said

³ Retrieved from <https://www.sgs.pt/pt-pt/sustainability/social-sustainability/audit-certification-and-verification/>

before, the work-life balance was pointed out as an important issue in terms of CSR and organizations are investing in processes to recognize it. The private sector in Portugal seems to be incentivized by a Governmental initiative – “Three in line Program” aiming to increase the balance between professional, personal and family life.

The environmental issues emerged as one priority to the organizations. It is unquestionable that the world is facing huge challenges due to the climate changes and organizations want to contribute to minimize it. In this research we could also identify a commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals⁴ and there is an intention among the organizations to link the CSR objectives with the 17 global aims.

If in the beginning the CSR efforts have been seen as a way to externally improve organizations reputation, nowadays it's understood as something that must be authentic. As stated by the interviewees:

today, there is a clear notion that CSR needs to be something internal and external. For credibility reasons, doesn't make sense to invest in the community and not be interested to invest in the employees. (...) Needs to be something coherent. Isn't worth to have external CSR if you don't have internal CSR. (Organization 4)

At last, the CSR is becoming a “shared issue” among different departments. It is a concern to all organizations under study, but the desire to create an independent CSR department was not found.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

One of the greatest disappointments was to realize the lack of interest and availability of the organizations to participate in this study that by principle should have been of their interest as members of Grace. In the association we found organizations belonging to different sectors of activity and there seems to be great differences from those that work in the industrial sector as they have, due to governmental constraints more structured approaches to all the security and environmental issues. The same can be said about all those that belong to multinational corporations that have to conform with international CSR programs. The main data gathered at the quantitative phase showed that the social (philanthropic) area emerged as the most relevant one in all the organizations, what was largely confirmed during the qualitative phase where researchers were able to understand that the idea of CSR/CC is often understood in a mere instrumental sense (Morsing, 2017) and more or less as equivalent to voluntary work. The qualitative approach enabled researchers to confirm these data and to understand better the motives that congregated the organizations in the association. The key element that seems to aggregate all these organizations in the realm of Grace is the enterprise

iso-26000-performance-assessment-social-responsibility

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.ods.pt>

volunteering programs promoted by the Association what we must say was also quite an unexpected result.

Moreover, it was also quite a surprise to realize that the concept of “corporate citizenship” does not have any expression in the Portuguese organizations interviewed even in those that belong to an association that entitles itself as promoting the reflection about CC. It was also possible to conclude that all the issues that dealt in a more intimate way with employees policies, as for instance those that tend to be categorized under the tag “work-life balance”, seem to be giving their first steps. In certain areas where employees tend to have less qualifications and salaries that are in accordance with the values of the national minimum wage the questions concerning CSR as expressed by the organizations tend to be mixed up with issues that some authors may consider as employees’ benefits.

Maybe the most unexpected element that the researchers found concerns the number of non for profit organizations that belong to Grace and especially the fact that some of those organizations are foundations that belong to major national and international corporations. Some questions emerge when confronted to this specific issue: are the market still influenced by Friedman (1970) and dealing with CSR as preconized by the Nobel prize? The purpose of enterprise is profit and if the shareholders are socially motivated, they can devote their money and time to charities as for Friedman, as curiously enough as for so many of the left-wing politicians, social responsibility belongs to the governmental sphere (Moon, 2014). No one is here defending that enterprises should substitute the state, the social state is a key element in the construction of our European identity and as Kott (2017) says is understood by the others as an important element of our attractiveness.

Corporate messages are one among many voices that take part nowadays in the conversations about the companies CSR/CC (Rasche, Morsing & Moon, 2017) so it seems a bit dated some of the concerns of the organizations with the fact that to communicate some of their worries or challenges concerning the employees or the environment might be a problem for their reputations, that is, for their good name. Maybe no one has managed to summarize in a better way this dilemma as Verhezen (2015) when he entitled his book as *The vulnerability of corporate reputation*. But if it is true that the reputation is an ongoing process it is also true that organizations that tend to be expressive, to use the Wittgensteinian expression, and not only descriptive of their practices are much better understood by their stakeholders. Schultz and Hatch (2000) have put it quite clear when they highlighted the fact that reputation is built on the basis of how well all the constituencies of an organization buy into its overall meaning. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the understanding the interviewed organizations have in general of the role of the communication or PR practitioners. The main point of view found in this research tends to coincide with a vision labelled by Morsing (2017) as merely instrumental (inform the relevant stakeholders about the corporate CSR activities, in quite a very market oriented perspective) when referring to different forms of expressing the social and environmental worries of the enterprises. Communication is seen merely as report

function and quite useful to follow the global reporting indicators guidelines⁵ and publish a report on CSR or, using, in the words of Herzig and Kuhn (2017), a “plethora” of other labels for non-financial reports. Morsing (2017) considers two other phases, the political and the network one. These second and third phases are precisely the ones that might be considered within a vision of corporate citizenship.

Corporate citizenship not in a heavy and strict philosophical sense but understood as an active element in a much more society-centric perspective were the organization is understood as a partner in order to find the best solutions to global and globalized problems. We are thinking about corporation’s participation in partnerships as well as assuming certain engagements that might be seen as political especially in societies with non-democratic governments. It might also be important to note that nowadays organizations do not control the implications of all their actions or how their actions (communication included) will be understood by multiple stakeholders in different regions. It seems quite easy for the organizations interviewed to assume their social role, to see themselves as social actors the question of seeing themselves as political actors was vehemently denied all over the interviews. Only one of the interviewees assumed their role in shaping policies for better working conditions or as a pioneer in working for a better work-life balance. It seems that Moon’s (2014) statement that “there’s an elephant in the CSR room: the political role of corporations is usually excluded from their own accounts of CSR” (p. 133) is quite relevant in the case of the results found. It may be noted the number of corporations that have already engaged in different political activist actions since the boycotts to apartheid in South Africa or the more recent cases of organizations that petitioned the governor of Arizona to veto an anti-gay law (Moon, 2014).

What seems to be a tendency is clearly the relevance of the concept of sustainability understood as “sustainable development” as it has already been asserted by different authors (Broom & Sha, 2013; Morsing, 2017). If ten years ago the concept was understood still in an environmental vein nowadays it tends to be aligned with the 1987 Brundtland report as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁶. We could even speculate that this might be a concept to gain space in detriment of the corporate social responsibility one in the next few years according to the 27 interviews conducted all along this study.

What clearly seems to be lacking is the capacity to monitor, evaluate and communicate the impacts of the companies. It was quite common to realize that the interviewed organizations tend to evaluate the outputs in the form of finance or employee time but almost none had clearly knowledge about how their policies and activities really improved the lives of the employees, or reduced poverty or enhanced the well-being of the consumers.

From a theoretical point of view one of the most relevant aspects highlighted in this research for the PR professionals is the need for a better understanding of the total

⁵ See <https://www.globalreporting.org/Pages/default.aspx>

⁶ Retrieved from <https://apambiente.pt/index.php?ref=16&subref=140>

quality management (TQM) paradigm. A more comprehensive approach to the questions of the connection between what in the literature is known as the CSR paradigm and the total quality management one is needed (Frolova & Lapina, 2014). With greater relevance in the industrial sector these two areas had been seen as quite different. In this new framework, and due to the lack of a constitutive approach to the concept of communication, we fear that the role of PR professionals tends to be reduced to mere report questions.

If it is true that while doing these kind of research and especially generally in the realm of the qualitative research, no statistical generalization is possible and that is not even the main intent, it is possible to speculate as Maxwell has so well put it, that there is no obvious reason *not* to believe that the results apply more generally (Maxwell, 2013).

Translation: Mafalda Eiró-Gomes and Ana Raposo

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