What drives the evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility strategies? An institutional logics perspective

Arena, M., Azzone, G., Mapelli, F. (*)

Marika Arena
marika.arena@polimi.it
Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering, Politecnico di Milano

Giovanni Azzone
giovanni.azzone@polimi.it
Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering, Politecnico di Milano

Francesca Mapelli (*) corresponding author
francesca.mapelli@polimi.it
Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering, Politecnico di Milano

Abstract

This paper moves from the idea that the term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to an "umbrella" concept entailing a diversified set of practices through which a company aims to meet the expectations of a broad range of stakeholders. This concept implies that there is a need for companies to disentangle the complex relationships among their social obligations and to define CSR strategies that are actually effective and efficient. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the dimensions along which CSR is evolving and the pressures that can explain companies' positioning in relationship to these dimensions in order to provide managers and academics with a comprehensive framework. Grounded on an institutional perspective and specifically on the concept of institutional logics, a framework of the contextual factors that influence companies' choices with respect to CSR strategies is developed. The proposed framework is then used to analyse the case of a multinational energy company that has significantly redefined its CSR strategy over time, thus tracing the influence of different institutional pressures. The case analysis illuminated three main types of responses to tensions emerging between different pressures: focusing on one prevailing logic; hybridizing practices to balance contrasting logics; and decoupling initiatives to answer 'in parallel' to different pressures. Therefore, the paper contributes to the CSR literature investigating the relevance of the concept of institutional logics for the topic and can also support managers in shaping CSR strategy.

Keywords

CSR; drivers for evolution; energy sector; institutional logics.

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1. Introduction

In the current competitive context, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a pervasive phenomenon: it is a strategic theme for business managers (Campbell, 2007; Castelló and Lozano, 2009), a policy issue for governments and policy makers (Steurer et al., 2012) and a popular topic of research for academics in different disciplines (Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Campbell, 2007; Lindgreen and Swaen, 2010). Nevertheless, there is not just one shared interpretation of CSR, and this term does not refer unequivocally to a coherent set of practices (Crane et al., 2015; Varga, 2015); instead, it is more of an "umbrella concept" that includes a broad variety of activities. CSR practices may range from the contribution to the activities of local communities (e.g., donations) to the adoption of inclusive and progressive human resource management practices (e.g., gender diversity, employee empowerment) to the incorporation of environmental or social characteristics or features into production processes and products (e.g., renewable energies and energy-efficiency-based technologies) (Su et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016(a); Zeng et al., 2017(a); Zeng et al., 2017(b)).

The concept dates back to the 1950s, when authors such as Bowen (1953) addressed it in terms of businessmen's fulfilment of their obligations to society. The first definitions were followed by several refinements that specified and further developed the concept of CSR, with reference to the ideas of responsiveness to stakeholders' claims (Carroll, 1979), including operational and strategic CSR (Drucker, 1984; Lee, 2008) and shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2006). Nevertheless, despite the variegated definitions of CSR that have been posited over the last 60 years, one feature is recurrent and transversal to different conceptualizations – i.e., the existing link between CSR and the set of values that are dominant in a certain context and time.

This consideration has an obvious impact on how companies formulate and deploy their CSR strategies. Companies must understand the expectations that they can either answer or anticipate and design their CSR practices by choosing between a wide range of alternatives. This implies that in order to define and implement more effective and efficient CSR strategies, there is a need for companies to disentangle the complex relationship between the contextual factors and the environmental pressures that shape the social obligations to which they are subject and the characteristics of the CSR activities they may put in place. This relationship has not been fully explored in the literature, as testified by some recent calls about the need to create awareness about CSR activities and what informs them in the composite European business environment (Maon et al., 2015), leading to the objective of this paper. In detail, this paper aims to identify the dimensions along which CSR is evolving and the pressures that can explain companies' positioning in relationship to these dimensions in order to provide managers and academics with a comprehensive framework. To achieve this aim, the paper is grounded on an institutional perspective, referring to the concept of institutional logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991) to address the contextual factors that influence companies' choices with respect to CSR practices.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical lens that is used in this study and presents the conceptual framework that relies on the analytical instrument of ideal types. Section 3 describes how empirical data were collected and analysed. Then, in Section 4, the ideal types are used to interpret the CSR strategy of a large multinational company competing in the energy sector. Finally, discussion and conclusions follow in Section 5.

2. Theoretical perspectives

2.1 The evolution of the CSR concept

The origins of the CSR concept date back to the 1950s, when Bowen published a book entitled "Social Responsibilities of the Businessman", which credited him as the founder of modern CSR (Carroll 1999; 2008). In this publication, Bowen provides the first definition of social responsibility as "the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and value of our society" (Bowen, 1953, p. 6). This first definition paved the way for a series of refinements and redefinitions that enriched and modified the concept of CSR (for a complete review of the evolution of the definitions of CSR, please see Carroll 1999, 2008, and Lee, 2008). The original idea was somehow related to the notion of stewardship because the separation between ownership and control in large corporations empowers managers with the responsibility of serving the interests of other constituencies (Berle and Means, 1930). Then, subsequent definitions lead to a progressive enlargement of the associated functions, in line with the awareness of the broader impact that business has on society. Reference is made to the ability of a company to respond to its stakeholders' claims (Carroll, 1979) and to have "beneficial rather than adverse effects on pertinent corporate stakeholders" (Epstein, 1987, p. 104).

Beginning in the 1990s, the concept was further broadened with the formulation of the idea of strategic CSR, according to which organizations intentionally leverage sustainability to gain potential competitive advantages while addressing the interests of their stakeholders (Drucker, 1984; Lee, 2008). This concept was further developed by Porter and Kramer (2006) with the idea of shared value, which stresses the existence of synergies among the components of the triple bottom line and highlights how the integration of sustainability within core business activities leads to "greater economic value and broader strategic benefits for all participants" (Porter and Kramer, 2011, pp. 5).

Along this path, new labels have often been introduced to highlight the emergence of slightly different or new conceptualizations of CSR (e.g., corporate citizenship, corporate sustainability, and shared value). However, new ideas have not typically replaced prior concepts but continue to coexist with them, resulting in a lack of clear boundaries between old and new conceptualizations. Furthermore, despite the heterogeneity of the definitions that have been carved out, the fundamental link between CSR practices and the set of values (and related expectations) that are dominant in a certain context/time is recurrent and common to different conceptualizations. This recurrent feature develops the idea of a dynamic nature of CSR that should answer to the diverse requirements put forth by society.

From this perspective, the big revolutions that have invested in and reshaped the current business environment – globalization (Albrow and King, 1990), digitalization and the so-called industry 4.0 (Brettel et al., 2014) – have dramatically changed the social requirements with which companies must comply. Globalization has exposed corporations to heterogeneous social, cultural and political values, whereby they operate in complex environments characterized by diversified and potentially contradictory social demands (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006). Digitalization has made the organizational boundaries more permeable to community influence, with information flowing from company to community and vice versa in a very short time (Aula, 2010; Post, 2000). Industry 4.0, with increasing trends towards automation and data exchange in manufacturing technologies, has posed new challenges (along with business opportunities) related to the interaction between human and non-human actors (Decker, 2017; Wang et al., 2016(b)).

In order to analyse the impact of the changes of the set of values and expectations of the surrounding context on companies' CSR strategies, an institutional approach is employed. Indeed, this view is intimately connected to the idea that CSR is shaped by societal expectations whereby the expectations of society are naturally entrenched in institutions.

2.2 Institutional perspectives on CSR strategy

This paper relies on the concept of institutional logics that was first formulated by Friedland and Alford (1991). In their work, the authors identify the core institutions of a society as the capitalist market, the bureaucratic state, families, democracy, and religion. They assert that each institution has a central logic that constrains both the means and ends of individual and organizational behaviour. Later, Thornton (2004, p. 12) further developed this idea stating that "society is comprised of multiple institutional orders or societal sectors, each of which has a central logic-both material practices and symbols that comprise its ongoing principles and that are available to individuals and organizations to elaborate." The main institutional orders identified by Thornton (2004) are the market, the corporation, the professions, the family, the religions, and the state; Thornton et al. (2012) added community to this list.

A key aspect of this perspective is that the influence of any of the central institutions may be felt across industries and fields, although with differences in the relative influence they have within a particular setting (Greenwood et al., 2010). Prior studies that embrace this perspective highlight that even when less prevalent logics have only a localized or weak influence, practices prescribed by different logics are in place. For instance, Thornton (2004) shows the effects of interplay of an editorial logic and market logic in the U.S. publishing industry. Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) show the influence of market, professional pressures and family pressures in audit and law firms. Vurro et al. (2011) highlight the interplay of market- and policy-oriented logics in explaining different characteristics of cross-sector social partnership. This interplay of multiple institutional pressures means, in the words of Greenwood et al. (2010), that "organizations confront institutional complexity" (Greenwood et al., 2010, p. 2).

As follows, we rely on the concept of multiple institutional logics to explain the heterogeneity of companies' positioning with respect to the dimensions along which CSR is evolving and define an overarching framework to support the understanding of the influence of different institutional orders on CSR strategies.

2.3 Logics multiplicity in the elemental categories of CSR strategy

In order to understand how different institutional orders influence companies' CSR strategies, the research builds on the analytical approach proposed by Thornton and colleagues, which relies on the concept of ideal types (Freidson, 2001; Goodrick and Reay, 2011; Thornton, 2004; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). The paper follows this approach since it is recognized to be useful for disentangling "multiple patterns of constructs and nonlinear relationships that determine the dependent variable" (Thornton, 2004, p. 25). In particular, it enables the systematic analysis of empirical variations providing a "tool to interpret cultural meaning" based on the comparison of empirical data with the ideal type (Thornton, 2004; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 119).

The use of ideal types is based on the definition of formal analytical models – i.e., typologies – that are represented through a matrix in which the X-axis outlines the institutional orders or logics that are relevant in a specific context (e.g., family, state, market…) and the Y-axis represents the related elemental categories or building blocks. The contents of the cells created by combining the X and Y-axis represent cultural symbols and material practices particular to each order (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 54) – i.e., provide a representation of the expected "behaviour" of each logic.

Accordingly, in this study, the ideal types were developed basing on prior research and theory in the field of CSR. To this aim, the institutional orders that are relevant in the specific setting were first defined as the market, state, community and profession. Given that corporate logic and market logic are intimately related and their expected behaviours are blended and blurred (Currie and Spyridonidis, 2016; Thornton et al., 2012), they are not disaggregated in this paper.

Then, the elemental categories were defined in terms of CSR's main evolutionary lines. Despite the significant body of literature on the topic, no shared taxonomy of the dimensions that characterize a CSR strategy was available and different authors have used different terms to refer to different issues. Hence, in order to select the elemental categories, a literature review was performed, identifying the recurrent topics and paying particular attention to the elements of nonlinear evolution (i.e., elements that are recurrent despite being characterized by high variability in terms of content, tools and configurations). The elemental categories that were identified based on this process include balancing the relationships between CSR objectives, system boundaries, stakeholder engagement, collaborations and alliances, accountability and reporting. The heterogeneity of results reported by other scholars in connection to these elemental categories suggested that related CSR dynamics might be explained well by the influence of different institutional logics. In the following paragraphs, the elemental categories are presented by building on the previous literature and then analysed in connection with institutional orders.

The balancing and relationships between CSR objectives concerns the relative weight of economic, environmental and social performance, and their reciprocal influence and relationship. Prior research highlights that the relative importance and the relationships between different dimensions of sustainability have changed over the years, with environmental and social goals assuming more prominence than they have in the past. This re-balance has led to the emergence of hybrid organizations, which Battilana et al. (2012) propose as an aspirational model in which each activity simultaneously creates economic and social value (Battilana et al., 2012; Montabon et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it is clear that there is not a unique position considering if and how a prioritization between different performance dimensions is necessary, desirable or, in contrast, detrimental (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Visser, 2010, 2012; Hahn and Figge, 2015).

System boundaries refer to the geographical and time span along which the effects determined by a company activity are considered. In this respect, the literature has given increasing attention to the concepts of the life cycle and extended value chain, with the inclusion of both direct and indirect effects (Porter and Kramer, 2006, 2011; Visser, 2010; 2011; 2012). Still, the definition of these boundaries is complex, and companies' strategies are variegated in practice (Ny et al., 2006; Hahn and Figge, 2015).

Stakeholder engagement is understood as those practices an organization undertakes to involve stakeholders in its activities. A substantial stream of research highlights a clear trend towards "more" involvement – i.e., more stakeholders involved, in an anticipated manner, taking on extended roles (Athanasopoulou and Selsky, 2015; Evan and Freeman, 2004). However, prior research also caveats from the "more is better" view, highlighting that the relationship between engagement and CSR is complex and multifaceted, as a great deal of involvement does not necessarily mean that a company is behaving in a responsible way and vice versa (Greenwood, 2007).

Collaborations and alliances refer to different forms of partnerships with other organizations, such as educational institutions, international and local development organizations, NGOs and social enterprises. Recent research has pinpointed how they could help large firms to gain authority, add competences, and increase legitimacy, particularly in local contexts (Di Domenico et al., 2008; Sharp and Zaidman, 2010; Spitzeck et al., 2013; van den Buuse, 2012), even though the way these collaborations could be defined and how they work is subject to high variability (Jamali and Keshishian, 2009).

Lastly, accounting and reporting refers to how a company measures and reports its economic, environmental and social performance. Even if the idea that a company should measure and account for more than just its economic performance can be now taken for granted (Junior et al., 2014), significant differences remain between companies with regard to the approaches used to address sustainability reporting and the content and quality of reports (Fortanier et al., 2011)

As previously anticipated, the combination of the institutional orders (X-axis) and the elemental categories (Y-axis) provides a representation of the expected “behaviour” of each institutional logic, as reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Ideal types of CSR strategy

	Market	**State**	**Community**	**Profession**
Balancing and relationships between CSR objectives	Profit maximization and instrumental approach	No prioritization Respect for relevant laws and regulation Focus on contribution to public good	No prioritization Focus on the impact on (local) communities	Shared value and Triple Bottom Line No trade-offs and tensions
System boundaries	System boundaries are set by the company’s operations and its reference market	System boundaries are set by the countries / areas where the company operates	Geographical boundaries and / or common activities and beliefs	System boundaries are guided by the concepts of extended value chain and lifecycle
Stakeholders’ engagement	Selected stakeholders (in particular the powerful ones) with the aim of furthering the goals of the organization	Legitimate stakeholders	Interested communities (without differentiation between legitimate / non-legitimate, powerful / non-powerful)	Legitimate and powerful stakeholders

Collaborations and alliances	Strategically selected collaborations and alliances	No specific requirements	Collaborations and alliances with actors involved in the community	Collaborations and alliances with actors affiliated with the “professional” network
Accountability and reporting	Legitimacy and reputation management	Compliance with mandatory disclosures	Monitoring of issues that are relevant to the community	Compliance with guidelines, standards and best practices (GRI reporting)

As shown in the above table, the market logic assumes a prioritization between different corporate objectives, whereby economic results are prioritized over environmental and social results and companies are guided in defining their CSR strategies by the “business case” for CSR. Hence, organizations’ responses to social and environmental challenges are instrumental and are framed around how firms can benefit financially from addressing societal concerns (Carroll and Shabana, 2010; Gao and Bansal, 2013). In this logic, the boundaries of the system are set based on the reference market and its expectations. The stakeholders that are engaged are strategically selected with the aim of furthering the goals of the organization as a vehicle for achieving the organization’s own interest (Greenwood, 2007). Similar considerations are applied to collaborations and alliances that, according to the market logic, are driven by the search for increased legitimacy and positive reputation effects (Currall and Inkpen, 2002; Oliver, 1990; Stuart, 2000). Finally, within a market logic, corporate social accounting and reporting are strongly interconnected with reputation management processes (Bebbington et al. 2008; Hogan and Lodhia, 2011). Sustainability reports serve as a marketing instrument for clients and stakeholders that could exert power over the company.

The state logic assumes no prioritization between different dimensions but, first of all, compliance with laws and regulations that emanate from regulatory bodies at different levels in the field of CSR (local, national, and international) and have a variety of forms (formal, binding law, and recommendations with no legal standing) (Buhmann, 2006). These regulations may be concerned with the prevention or mitigation of negative effects associated with a company’s activities (e.g., environmental pollution) or the respect of shared principles (e.g., human rights, labour) or may set some minimum requirements about the expected contribution of the company to society (as in the case of regulations concerning local content in developing countries). The latter element is particularly relevant in the state logic, even in the absence of regulation, recalling the idea that corporations may, and somehow are expected to, assist a government in fulfilling welfare goals and producing an economic effect at the local, regional or country levels (Crilly et al., 2016). The identification of the regulations that are relevant for a specific organization is typically related to where it carries out its operations – e.g., a global company is subject to both local and international regulations, whilst a local company characterized by a local supply chain is subject predominantly to the regulation of the country in which it is based. The state logic pays particular attention to legitimate stakeholders with whom a company is bounded by a contract or due to a moral obligation (Fortanier et al., 2011). Considering accounting and reporting, governments in different countries are setting stronger requirements for companies to be accountable for their social performance (consider, for instance, the EU directive concerning non-financial reporting or disclosure requirements concerning local content).

The community logic focuses specifically on the contribution of a company to the communities with which it interacts and it influences. The term "community" originally had a clear geographical connotation referring to a territory and a social action that is not restricted to the satisfaction of the communal economy's common economic needs. Later on, due to the advent of digitalization, the geographical connotation was replaced by sharing common activities and beliefs and expansion to communities driven by ICT technologies (Thornton et al., 2012). In this case, the boundaries of the system are determined by the boundaries of the interested communities (which can be diversified). The stakeholders involved are community members, without a clear distinction between legitimate/non-legitimate and powerful/non-powerful stakeholders. Similarly collaborations and alliances are naturally foreseen for actors that are part of the community, such as local associations or international associations interested in or related to a specific local community. Like concerns accounting and reporting, community logics stress the relevance of measuring and monitoring sustainable development issues that are important to local communities and evolve over time as communities become engaged and circumstances change (Bengo et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2006; Riley, 2001). Additionally, the methods used to collect, interpret and report data should be easily and effectively used by non-specialists so that local communities can be active participants in the process (Reed et al., 2006).

The professional logic relies heavily on concepts such as shared value, a triple bottom line, assuming the lack of a prioritization between environmental, social and economic objectives and even denying tensions and trade-offs between them (Crane et al., 2014), as well reflected in the mission and guidelines provided by several professional associations that have emerged in the field of CSR and sustainability (e.g., CSR associations and sustainability management associations) and that are becoming an important normative reference group serving as a guideline for individual practitioners, such as CSR managers, sustainability managers, and environmental managers. Accordingly, in the professional logic, the system boundaries are defined coherently with the concepts of extended value chain and lifecycle and stakeholder engagement processes are expected to balance stakeholders' legitimacy and power (ISO, 2017; UNIDO, 2009). The professional logic drives companies to adhere to international reporting frameworks such as those proposed by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2017(a); Fuente at al., 2017), whose latest version, which is called GRI Standard, was released in 2016 and is expected to become the global reference standard by the end of 2018, thus replacing the previous G4 guidelines (GRI, 2017(b)). Other reference frameworks are the integrated reporting (IIRC, 2017), as well as assurance frameworks based on verification standards such as ISAE 3000 (IFAC, 2017) and AA1000 AS (AA1000, 2008). In this way, the professional bodies take on a role that is similar to that of public accounting companies in relationship to financial reporting, providing assurance to a broad range of stakeholders about the credibility of the information disclosed by companies.

3 Data collection and analysis

The ideal types introduced in section 2.2 have been used to interpret the case study of a large multi-national company competing in the energy industry. The case company, labelled Alpha for confidentiality reasons, has been selected specifically because it must address a large degree of institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2010). It was founded as a state company in the 1960s and became a private company in the 1990s, even though the Italian State still participates. Alpha operates in over 30 countries, producing and distributing electricity and natural gas to approximately 60 million users. Their power stations range from thermoelectric ones to renewables and to nuclear ones. Starting from mid-1990s, Alpha has been investing in improving its environmental performances and in building robust relations with the interested local communities. Specifically, great attention has been devoted to CSR dedicated to internal stakeholders (i.e., policies for employees welfare) and to increase electricity production from alternative sources and energy efficiency. In addition, in the last few years, after the turnover among top managers, Alpha has begun to significantly increase the investments to improve its sustainability by referring to internationally recognized theoretical frameworks (i.e., shared value), redefining the company core values and the internal organization. The case company is studied concerning its CSR strategies implemented from 1996, the date of the first environmental report published on its website, to today.

Data about Alpha were collected by combining different sources, including semi-structured interviews with company representatives, direct observations, and archival and documental analyses to triangulate data and verify results. The interviews were carried out between 2015 and 2017 and included 15 informants, including both managers directly involved in key strategic processes and in CSR activities and other managers or employees not directly involved in those activities (Table 2). To prepare the interviews, the company website, documents publicly available or provided by the firm itself were examined. Then, the interviews were articulated around the above elemental categories and their evolution over the years. Particular attention was paid to explore the motivations of the choices made by the company in order to trace the influence of different institutional orders. All the interviews, which lasted between one and two hours, have been recorded and transcribed and the transcripts were manually coded. Data collected through the interviews were triangulated with information taken from the sustainability reports, public sources, and internal documents. In order to avoid recall bias and to overcome the lack of previous interviews (i.e., carried before 2015), particular attention was paid to the analysis of the environmental and sustainability reports of previous years and other documental sources (internal documents, press releases, and newspaper articles).

Table 2: Data sources

Type of source	Type of source
Interview	Chief Executive Officer
Interview	Head of Sustainability Projects
Interview	Head of Sustainability Planning and Performance Management
Interview	Head of Risk Management
Interview	Head of Financial Control
Interview	Junior Financial Control
Interview	Head of Marketing – Italy
Interview	Head of Marketing and Supply – Italy
Interview	Senior Marketing and Supply – Italy
Interview	Head of Business Development
Interview	Senior Business Development
Interview	Head of Communication
Interview	Head of Digital Communication
Interview	Legal office
Interview	Manager for Communication of Sustainability, Alpha Foundation
Direct observation	Participation to project meetings (related to the field of CSR)
On-line sources	Websites
On-line sources	Sustainability reports from 2002 to 2016 (latest published)
On-line sources	Environmental reports from 1997 to 2001
Archival documents	Other reports produced by the company (internal policies and guidelines)
Archival documents	Press released from 2002 to 2017

4 The case of Alpha

4.1 The evolution of Alpha CSR strategies under institutional pressures

In the following, we analyse the evolution of CSR in Alpha in connection to the five elemental categories identified in the ideal types and highlight the institutional logics that can explain Alpha's choices. The different institutional logics clearly coexist in this case over the whole timeframe analysed; however, in different periods, the influence of some institutional order is more evident in shaping the CSR strategy than others. In order to present the case, we identified three different periods in which the pressures to which Alpha is subjected appear more homogenous. The first period is between 1996 and 2001, while the second one is between 2001 and 2009, and finally, the last is from 2009 to today.

Balancing and relationships between CSR objectives

Although sustainability has always played a relevant role in the company's public discourse, the balancing of objectives and their relationships changed significantly over time.

In the first period analysed, the company addressed the sustainability issue mainly from an environmental perspective. The environmental reports published from 1996 to 2001 aimed to offer evidence to institutional stakeholders of the company's commitment towards environmental goals and demonstrating to local communities the benefits that the company could bring. Indeed, the company claimed several times to be highly attentive to "environmental protection", to "high environmental standards", and to the "evaluation of environmental performance" (environmental reports from 1996 to 2001). It struggled to show the benefits it brought to local communities. The reports frequently emphasize that the company is trying "to strengthen [its] local rooting" and "to increase the relations with local communities". To reach these aims, many environmental initiatives were delivered in joint collaborations with local institutions during those years. This articulation of the public discourse suggests a prevalence of the community and state logics.

In the second period, after the liberalization process of the Italian electricity market in the early 2000s, the market logic began to gain relevance. In the introductory letter to the 2002 sustainability report, the President declared:

> "Alpha aims to draw its own strategy inspiration not only from economic aspects but also even from environmental and social ones, since we are fully convinced that it will contribute to preserving our competitiveness and to increasing our brand reputation. Our final goal is still to assure, even over the long term, value creation for our shareholders." (2002 Sustainability report)

In addition, the analysis of reports from the early 2000s, confirmed by the informants during the interviews, highlights how Alpha management regarded socio-environmental goals as a crucial element of the company's goals, which called for an "intense interaction with the society" (Alpha President), hence recalling a community logic. Indeed, in all the analysed reports, at least one section was dedicated to the relations with the local communities through an account of investments in projects for local communities.

At that time, the accomplishment of socio-environmental goals grounded mainly on a philanthropic approach that the interviewees contrasted with what occurred in the last reference period.

> "Today, sustainability in Alpha implies [multiple levels of operations, in which] the merely philanthropic themes are referred to as our foundations […] We have experienced a crucial change of pace moving [from a philanthropic approach] to the 'creating shared value' one" (Head of Sustainability Projects).

Beginning in 2010, the issue of the integration between sustainability and strategic objectives emerged in both internal decision-making processes and in the company's public discourse, suggesting the prominence gained by the market logic, even though the community logic is still present. To show the reasons behind this shift, it is worth recalling what one of the informants said about Alpha's sustainability strategy:

> "The deep change we are experiencing as a company is somehow pushed by the fact that the external context is changing really quickly and deeply. So the energy paradigm is changing quickly

> and deeply. For instance, our competitors are no more only other large utilities, now we are competing even with Google. The world is completely different" (Head of Communication).

The trend of integrating socio-environmental objectives with the economic ones began in the environmental domain as Alpha started to intensively invest in renewable energies, anticipating regulatory requirements. In 2015, this process led to the development of an integrated strategic plan in which environmental and social goals were integrated with economic ones and were often presented as leverage to improve the economic results.

> "For Alpha, integrating sustainability in the strategic planning is doing business" (Manager for Communication of Sustainability, Alpha Foundation).

The leitmotiv of the integration of sustainability with the core business of the company was presented as a crucial element of the company's strategy in both the reports and public declarations of Alpha's top management.

> "Sustainability is integrated into the business model along the whole value chain and interprets and translates the Group's strategy into concrete actions" (2015 Sustainability report).

> "Since we first presented our transformational strategic plan at the beginning of 2015, we followed up with an accelerated update […] Alpha is a more focused, efficient and profitable organization, as the sustainable business model we built is bearing fruit with increasing momentum. [...] The whole strategic plan is strictly linked with the achievement of four of the sustainable development goals proposed by the UN" (Alpha CEO).

In this final period, the influence of the professional logic also became more evident. When explaining the integration between sustainability and business objectives, the interviewees frequently referred to the concept of shared value, presenting it as a blueprint of "advanced" CSR.

> "Sustainability in Alpha is developed as a creation of shared value – a very strong shared value – that is integrated within the business" (Head of Sustainability Projects).

> "The integration of the 'creating shared value' model began with Conventional Generation and particularly with Business Development, the first stage of the value chain, to then continue in the subsequent stages of the realization and management of assets. […] From the existing processes, the program led to the application of 'creating shared value' instruments on 37 business projects, establishing an integrated and modular model in which sustainability interacts with business, thus translating into a competitive advantage" (2015 Sustainability report).

System boundaries

The system boundaries gradually enlarged over time, as clearly shown in the analysis of public reports. In the beginning (i.e., 1996-2001), the only "area of interest" was Italy. Indeed, almost all projects shown in the reports referred to the Italian territory. Moreover, almost all numerical data reported were concerned with the Italian context. The decision to focus on the geographical area in which Alpha used to operate can be explained as a result of the influence of the state and community logics.

Since 2002, Alpha began to enlarge its geographical span, as "the market for Alpha is Italy and increasingly other countries where it is starting to operate" (2004 Sustainability report). The reports began to show references to projects carried out in developing countries, such as investments in educational projects for the sustainable development of the electricity sector. However, the main focus was still on the national market, with most social initiatives targeting the communities with whom Alpha used to interact (and representing its target market at that time).

Beginning in 2009, Alpha system boundaries were significantly enlarged, with growing attention paid to Africa (where the company had not yet operated) and South America (where the company was already operating). When managers were questioned about this choice, the influence of the market and community logics emerged together as relevant drivers. The market logic posed at the forefront the need for the company to connect its businesses to novel markets. From this perspective, the case of Africa is paradigmatic. Alpha has supported the socio-economic development of some African communities, with the idea that they could become new customers for the company itself. However, to do that, Alpha should invest in various sectors that are considered essential to support the development of communities, such as the health sector or the telecommunication communities, thus showing the relevance of community logics.

> "There are 6 hundred million people in Africa who do not have access to electricity, and those are the people who are currently still suffering from malaria and who are still dying from it. So health experts believe we can finish off malaria in a lifetime but only if we electrify those communities. Who is going to electrify those communities? It's not health experts, it's us… Once we have electrified the community, what can we do with electricity? We can sell them things, such as washing machines" (Head of Communication).

As a consequence, economic evaluations could no longer fail to consider socio-environmental aspects, as reflected in the procedures used to estimate the potential impact of future projects under analysis. Similarly, new models were defined to integrate extended value chain analyses (the influence of professional logics).

> "If there is a new business opportunity […] the Business Development team was used to carry out a merely technical analysis of the context to bring it to the Investment Committee. On the contrary, we have now developed a model […] that allows you to develop a very in-depth analysis of the context, which is not only a technical-economic analysis but also one that includes also all those social and environmental aspects that are usually disregarded. Usually, you go there, see the opportunity, but often, you do not care about the communities around it, you do not try to

> understand who they are, which are their needs, and which are the possibilities for the development on the long run. […] However, this was no longer enough" (Head of Sustainability Projects).

Stakeholders' engagement

Like other elemental categories, stakeholders' engagement practices also evolved significantly over time. During the first period, these practices were clearly underdeveloped and almost all references to stakeholders' engagement identified in the 1996-2001 reports dealt with institutions and customers. The reports indicate that the primary objective of the company was the "communication with citizens and institutions" (1997 Environmental report) to show them the benefits of Alpha's environmental strategies. Particularly, Alpha's aim appeared to be ensuring its licence to operate and "to control the increased sensitivity to environmental aspects of citizens" (1999 Environmental report), suggesting the prominence of state and community logics.

In the early 2000s, when the first sustainability reports were issued, the attention dedicated to institutions decreased while the attention devoted to local communities increased, suggesting the influence of the community over the state logic. Several stakeholders engagement projects began to address local stakeholders, trying to "strengthen the company relation with local communities" (2004 Sustainability report). At the same time, shareholders gained prominence in comparison to previous years (market logic).

> "Alpha has a deep interaction with the society and therefore aims to maintain and develop a robust relationship of trust with its stakeholders; the shareholders in the first instance" (2002 Sustainability report).

Later, beginning in 2009, communities' engagement practices became more formalized, suggesting the influence of the professional logic. In 2009, a materiality analysis was developed and reported for the first time in the sustainability report. The centrality of the materiality analysis for Alpha stakeholders' engagement is justified by the following declaration:

> "Our key point concerning stakeholders' engagement at the group level, country level and department level, is to use the materiality" (Head of Sustainability Planning and Performance Management).

In recent years, Alpha has been developing an even more structured procedure for engaging with a larger set of stakeholders not only ex post but even in ex ante phases of new project design and development:

> "There are three phases: Mapping, Engagement, Management. […] Usually, everybody just focuses on the institutional stakeholder, which usually has short-term requirements, but those are not the requirements of the other stakeholders, such as communities and local NGOs, together with whom we work" (Head of Sustainability Projects).

Alpha initiated a bi-directional relation with local communities. At the time of the interviews, a digital networking platform was under development to allow to better connect different stakeholders in both developing countries and Italy. The first attempts were held in 2016, with "real-time interaction and '2-way' communication initiatives", which the Head of Digital Communication declared to be "completely new for the company".

It is clear that, especially in developed countries, where the requirements to act as a responsible company are growing, community-based and market-based institutions are prominent.

Collaborations and alliances

Collaborations and alliances emerged as an integral part of Alpha's CSR strategy mainly in recent years. In the late 1990s, there were a few collaborations with not-for-profit associations and some local institutions, which were again in line with the dominant logics in this period. The reports show that claims such as "thanks to the fruitful collaboration with local institutions and no-profit associations, [Alpha] has substantially contributed to important projects spread on the national territory" (1998 Sustainability report). Again, a focus on collaborations with national local entities is present coherently with the prominence of community and state logics.

The range of collaborations was gradually broadened in the following years. Since 2002, Alpha began to take part in several international networks with the aim of developing and implementing projects for local communities, in line with a philanthropic approach.

> "Within the collaboration with the energy international network, Alpha has contributed to the delivery of a project aimed at the supply of renewable energy systems for Indonesia" (2002 Sustainability report).

Later on, from 2001 to 2009, Alpha's involvement in international networks seemed to be pushed further by market logics. The company considered participation in these initiatives as a way to better exploit synergies between environmental and economic performances, as pinpointed by the following declaration of Alpha's subscription to a global agreement.

> "Climate change is a global challenge that governments, private companies, and citizens need to face, playing different roles. Alpha, acknowledging its responsibilities, is committed to battling climate change, as the improvement of environmental performance contributes to the protection of the Earth and, at the same time, allows the company to create value" (2009 Sustainability report).

In the most recent period, from 2009 to today, the community logic again emerged in support of collaboration with external entities (i.e., NGOs, academia, and social enterprises) to deliver socially oriented projects. However, the community logic often acted alongside the market one. Alpha supported the spread of a novel internal approach that involved a wide range of different actors, such as universities, research institutions, start-ups, incubators, and NGOs. The Manager of the Communication stated,

> "We take all this 96 GW of installed capacity and this 1.9 million km of grid and open them up, in the same way HP opened up. [] Because we are the best in the world in terms of what we do, but what we do on our own, in an isolated way, is not going to win in this new energy paradigm" (Head of Communication).

The top management's commitment is also shown by the presence of Alpha within several international agencies focused on CSR- and sustainability-related issues. The Head of Sustainability Planning and Performance Management declared,

> "If we specifically considered sustainability, we obviously work together with Global Compact […], we work in strict contact with the Global reporting Initiative, with several new projects, such as G4, Reporting 2025, etc. For us, that is a fundamental element. Then, as institutional partnerships, we have, for instance, CSR Europe, a CSR manager network, and if you want to focus on Italy, the Italian Global Compact Network, RSI [Rethink Sustainability Initiative] because they are initiatives that need to be considered" (Head of Sustainability Planning and Performance Management).

From this statement, the influence of the professional logic is clear.

Accountability and reporting

Referring to accountability and reporting, in the first period analysed, the company used environmental reporting as the main (and the sole) instrument to monitor and communicate its environmental performance. The choice of introducing environmental reporting is explained well by the state as well as community logics, as shown by the following quotation:

> "The willingness of the company to inform in a transparent and precise manner about its activities and to verify achieved results, employed resources and fixed objectives […] with the goal of communicating with institutions and citizens is confirmed" (1997 Environmental report).

This is only an example of the numerous sections of the environmental reports in which emphasis was placed on the need to inform institutions and citizens about the results achieved by Alpha in terms of environmental sustainability.

Analysing the evolution of the reports over time (i.e., 2001-2009), an emerging feature is the struggle between a qualitative approach versus a quantitative one. Indeed, in the first sustainability reports – published from 2001 to 2006 – there was almost only qualitative data, while most quantitative data were shown in the annexes. This choice was explained by the informants with the aim of targeting citizens and non-specialized readers (coherently with the community logics). Afterwards, the focus shifted towards reports made up of purely quantitative indicators, with the introduction of several graphs and tables. This shift was instead explained with the need to address the so-called social responsible investors (coherently with the market logics).

Finally, the most recent reports (i.e., from 2009 on) present a balanced mix of qualitative and quantitative information, with the specific aim of being able to address non-technical stakeholders. The informants declared following the G4 guidelines from the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2017(b)), which implies the definition of the set of indicators to be included in the sustainability report in accordance with the materiality analysis. However, they usually monitor a larger set of indicators related to sustainability, which accounts for almost 600 metrics, and then select the most relevant to be disclosed in the annual report in accordance with the materiality.

> "We have a set of approximately 600 indicators of sustainability, we need those indicators to monitor our sustainability performance. […] It is plain that the reporting system is aligned with the GRI system. […] Then, we report the indicators that are most interesting for us, so we do not confuse who reads them" (Head of Sustainability Planning and Performance Management).

Furthermore, until 2013, the company published both a sustainability and an environmental report, with the latter being much wider than the former. Beginning in 2014, the company began to publish a single report balancing economic, social and environmental issues.

In very recent years, even though the company has kept using combined reporting, comprising financial and sustainability reports, they began to discuss the possibility of producing an integrated report, which is a concise communication of the company's strategy, governance, performance and prospects aimed to attract investment crucial to achieving sustainable prosperity over the long term (IIRC, 2017).

> "We have created a system which is actually a combined report […] and not yet an integrated report" (Head of Sustainability Planning and Performance Management).

In addition, even the layout of the report has changed over time: now, the layout is designed to make the report more interactive and, again, useful to engage with stakeholders (community logics). To reach this goal, several tools have been implemented. For instance, through the usage of digital instruments and social media, at the time of the interviews, Alpha was developing a web network that could be used to be continuously in touch with a great range of stakeholders so that their requirements could be taken into account "in real time".

> "Our approach is user centric. […] Instead, until now, Alpha communication was a purely delivery of information" (Head of Digital Communication)

4.2 A synthetic overview of Alpha's CSR strategies from an institutional perspective

As shown in the previous section, Alpha CSR strategies tend to be homogeneous within the three defined time periods, and this homogeneity can be explained by the relative stability of the influence of the institutional pressures in the given period (Table 3).

Table 3: Influences of institutional logics over the defined time periods for Alpha CSR

	Market	State	Community	Profession
1st period: 1996-2001	*X*	√	√	*X*
2nd period: 2001-2009	√	*X*	√	*X*
3rd period: 2009-today	√	*X*	√	√

In the first period analysed, from 1996 to 2001, the influence of the community and state logics were dominant in informing the company's choices. Alpha's focus was on the Italian market, its main market at that time, and the company was interested in engaging mainly with local and institutional stakeholders. This focus is also reflected in Alpha's strategic objectives and in how objectives and results were reported. Indeed, reporting was aimed mainly at communicating to local and institutional stakeholders Alpha's environmental performance to engage with them and to ensure the license to operate. In line with this approach, collaborations were built mainly with national local entities.

In the second period, from 2001 to 2009, after the liberalization of the electrical market, shareholders became the major target of the company's public discourse and gained prominence over institutional stakeholders. The CSR was used instrumentally to deal with the deep change in the market in which Alpha operates, and this obviously drove the choices made by Alpha concerning sustainability planning and reporting and the selection of the collaborations and alliances. Alpha also began enlarging the system boundaries, thus introducing projects in emerging and developing countries, coherently with the expansion of its business.

Finally, from 2009 to today, the complexity of the institutional environment increased further and, to address the increased complexity, the company began to refer to professional guidance and standards more heavily. The CSR strategy was reframed in terms of shared value creation and the company made reference to the professional network in connection to the need both to build and nurture collaborations and alliances and to display compliance with international reporting frameworks. The continuous reference to the notion of shared value clearly influenced the balancing of objectives and the enlargement of the system boundaries. Further, stakeholders were involved not only in ex post monitoring phases but also ex ante in planning stages through "2-way" communication channels.

5 Discussion and conclusions

Grounded on an institutional perspective, this paper proposed a comprehensive framework aimed to identify the pressures that can explain companies' positioning in a relationship to some key dimensions along which CSR is evolving. The proposed framework has been used to analyse the case of a multinational energy company that has significantly redefined its CSR strategy over time. The framework allowed us to trace the influence of different institutional pressures, making sense of the choices made by the company in different periods. Though different institutional orders clearly coexist in each time frame analysed, the articulation of the CSR strategy of the case company can be explained well by considering the interplay between different logics in different periods.

The case analysis enlightens three main types of responses to tensions emerging between different pressures: focusing on one prevailing logic; hybridizing practices in order to balance contrasting logics; and decoupling initiatives to answer "in parallel" to different pressures. In particular, when modifying the balance of objectives (after the liberalization of the energy market), the company resolves contrasts between different logics by adapting its strategy to the prevailing logic (in this case, the market logic) and using the professional logic to reinforce an instrumental view of CSR. Indeed, the concept of shared value is continuously mobilized to explain the quest of synergies between economic value and social and environmental value and the need to create economic value from sustainability initiatives. The second, approach, hybridization, emerges particularly in connection to stakeholder engagement with the introduction of hybrid forms of investment analysis that aim to answer both the market and the community logics. In this case, the company addresses the tensions between the market and the community logics by introducing new practices that aim to visualize in an integrated fashion the priorities that are driven by both institutional orders. Finally, the modification of the reporting system provides an example of parallel answers. In this case, in fact, the company modifies the reporting system in order to answer to the influence of the professional, market and community logics. On one hand, it produces reports that are fully compliant with the GRI and introduces the integrated reporting because it is considered as a blueprint of advanced CSR. On the other hand, it maintains simplified forms of reporting that are more coherent with the expectations of the local communities (which used to be provided a certain set of indicators with a certain format) and the investors.

From an academic perspective, the paper contributes to the literature in the field of CSR that suggests the relevance of the concept of institutional logics when carrying out an institutional analysis. Indeed, the theoretical lens of institutional theory is not new in this research field, as prior research has demonstrated its potential to analyse and explain CSR adoption, development and evolution (Brammer et al., 2012; Young and Makhijla, 2014). However, a limitation that is associated with the usage of this theoretical lens is the fact that researchers who have drawn on institutional theory have not accounted for the heterogeneity of firms within a given institutional context (Young and Makhija, 2014). Even when researchers have identified several distinct CSR strategies, they typically have not explained the sources of divergence (Lee, 2008). This argument reflects a common criticism of institutional theory: that it has been frequently criticized for relying too much on structural determinism in explanations (DiMaggio, 1988; Mouritsen, 1994). The concept of institutional logics provides a possible response to this criticism, recognizing that institutional contexts are not homogeneous but rather characterized by the coexistence of multiple and possibly contrasting institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Compared to other institutional approaches, institutional logics define the content of institutions and emphasize both the effects of multiple institutional logics on organizations and individuals and the role of action in affecting and being affected by these institutional pressures (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999).

From a managerial point of view, the proposed framework can support managers in analysing the implications that derive from the expectations of the surrounding context in connection to their CSR strategy, which could be useful both to better understand the results of past choices and to support the planning of future actions. Indeed, by understanding the expectations an organization must address, a manager can anticipate and proactively address the requirements of the environment.

Finally, the limitations of the paper and the implications for future research are discussed. First, the paper outlined the proposed framework and used a single case study to show its suitability to support the analysis of the evolution of a company's CSR strategy. The sources of heterogeneity were related to the evolving contextual pressures influencing the company and explaining its choices in relationship to the CSR strategy in different timeframes. Future work could extend the empirical analysis, comparing different organizations operating in the same sector in the same period of time and subject to similar institutional pressures. This paper analysed the redefinition of the company's CSR strategy, using the organization as the main unit of analysis and focusing on how the organization as an entity addresses the influence of different institutional orders. Future research could more specifically address the role of individual agency in dealing with embeddedness in different institutional logics simultaneously, for instance, analysing the influence of the characteristics of individual managers (such as the CEO or the members of the board of directors) on a company's CSR strategy.

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