

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: WHAT HAS BEEN ITS PATH?

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved in response to social tensions and transformations. Since its initial debates in the 1950s, when it was proposed as a means to align corporate operations with societal interests, CSR has progressively consolidated as a discipline. The 1970s, shaped by Cold War tensions, saw growing concerns about its implications, particularly the fear that greater corporate involvement in social issues might lead to the centralization of economic decision-making. Consequently, a management approach prioritizing profit maximization took hold, reinforcing the predominance of corporate interests, although discussions had already begun regarding economic, legal, and ethical responsibilities.

This period marked a turning point for CSR, and by the mid-1980s, stakeholder theory emerged, arguing that corporations should not only be accountable to shareholders but also to a broader range of stakeholders. This perspective sought to shift CSR beyond purely financial considerations by incorporating multiple actors into corporate decision-making. However, despite representing progress toward a more integrative approach, it did not fully displace corporations from the centre of CSR, as decision-making continued to be primarily guided by economic interests.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the CSR Pyramid was introduced, structuring corporate responsibilities hierarchically, with economic responsibility as the foundation, once again underscoring financial viability as the primary priority. Technological advancements and globalization during this decade further propelled CSR. The growing importance of sustainability strategies emerged as a response to consumer and non-governmental organization (NGO) pressure. Corporations increasingly adopted reporting and transparency practices to monitor their social and environmental impacts. This period also marked a significant shift with the introduction of international frameworks such as the United Nations Global Compact, which promoted ethical and sustainable corporate principles.

Subsequently, the concept of Shared Value arose, seeking to align social objectives with competitive advantage. This approach aimed to integrate social challenges into the strategic core of corporations, arguing that addressing issues such as poverty or sustainability could generate business opportunities. However, like previous contributions, this framework was criticized for maintaining corporations as the central actors, assessing social initiatives primarily based on their profitability.

In recent decades, debates concerning the authenticity of CSR have intensified. The concept of decoupling, defined as the gap between corporate commitments to CSR and the actual implementation of such commitments, has exposed the limitations of many corporate initiatives. CSR has been accused of being instrumentalized, used more as a marketing tool than as a genuine commitment to sustainable development, raising questions about its applicability and effectiveness.

Over the past decade, CSR has faced new challenges and opportunities. The increasing demands for transparency, social justice, and sustainability have compelled corporations to reassess their practices. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have provided a global framework to align corporate activities with the requirements of a fairer and more sustainable world. This has renewed interest in constructing a CSR approach that not only balances economic and social interests but also places collective well-being at its core.

CSR has become a fundamental component of corporate strategy, presenting a significant opportunity. However, criticisms of its utilitarian approach have grown, highlighting the urgent need for a profound transformation.

As we move further into this decade, in a world increasingly aware of pressing social and environmental issues, corporations have a unique opportunity to lead the transition toward a more just and sustainable development model. The evolution of CSR into an authentic and transformative force depends on the ability of corporations and society to collaborate in building a more equitable future—one that moves beyond instrumentalization and focuses on human development. This call to action is not only directed at corporations but also at the academic community and social leaders, urging them to contribute ideas and tools that enable this transformation. CSR has the potential to transcend its strategic function; it can serve as a driving force for constructing a society where human development and corporate interests find a sustainable and meaningful equilibrium.

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