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## THE ROLE OF THE CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN AZERBAIJAN

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### ABSTRACT

*Introduction and purpose of the study - The primary goal of this research work is to clarify and give a reasonable explanation to the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in sustainable development of small and medium-sized commercial organizations, particularly in post-soviet countries including Azerbaijan. As a central topic, it first discusses the concept of corporate social responsibility, its formation, development, transition to a new level, and then concentrates on the role of CSR for the companies, their sustainable development and establishing an effective dialogue with the overall environment. The author sets out the levels of responsibility of the business from the perspective of the CSR pyramid of Archie Carroll specifying the social responsibility as one of the most important responsibilities of businesses. The role of corporate social responsibility is underlined as an effective tool in gaining competitive advantage and establishing dialogue between the business organizations, community and governments.*

*Literature review - This research work is developed on the basis of published theoretical literature and articles of national and international researchers studying various aspects of CSR. Some field survey and first-hand information gathering has been conducted at this stage of the research. Used sources includes materials of scientific-practical conferences and business forums, expert analyses, documents of international organizations, as well as of business associations specialized also in scientific research.*

*Methodology - Methods include logical reasoning based on the analysis of scientific literature and of statistical data, analysis of CSR reports and data that is publicly available on the websites of different companies.*

*Practical and social implications - Conclusions and recommendations in this research work can be used by business organizations, particularly by SMEs who are interested in developing and practicing a consolidated CSR strategy. Furthermore, the content and the research materials of this study can be used for developing lectures/courses on CSR and Corporate Governance, Business Ethics, Strategic Management.*

**Keywords:** *Business and society, SME, social reporting, CSR, sustainable development, CSR pyramid*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the XX century and the first two decades of the XXI century has been remembered by globally remarkable changes in the behaviour of business organizations in terms of their increased responsibility towards the society and the environment around. These developments have particularly been observed in developed countries such as the United States, Canada and developed countries of Europe and Asia. Under the auspices and by the initiative of influential organisations certain guidelines have been developed and standards established to regulate CSR activity of across the world. In our days requirement to social component of the activity of enterprises gain more and more importance regardless of their size, field of action, form of



ownership and organizational-legal form, geographical location, culture and national traditions of the country they operate in.

## **2. CONCEPT OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, ITS FORMATION, DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSITION TO A NEW LEVEL**

Though the history of the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in its modern meaning is not that far the way it had gone through is quite impressive. As we know, intensive discussions about the social responsibility of enterprise's started after the World War II and as a term CSR was coined by American scientist Howard Bowen in his book «Social Responsibilities of the Businessman» (1953) where he underlined that entrepreneurs carry out responsibility towards the environment where they function and had to contribute to social development. Years later, in 1991 Archie Carroll, an American scientist and the author of the CSR pyramid, supported the CSR concept of H. Bowen in his article "CSR: Evolution of the Term" and emphasised the significance of social responsibility in the sustainable development of businesses. During the last three decades CSR concept has been given a great attention both theoretically and empirically. Having gained theoretical recognition and approval by prominent academicians such as Archie Carroll, Kotler, Schwartz, Dou Jones and others CSR became an integral part of the sustainable businesses across the globe. Though CSR has been recognized by majority as an indicator of company's sustainability and ethicalness there are also approaches against this concept. For example, some scientists support the position of businessmen and entrepreneurs who consider that the solution of social issues and problems of society is the responsibility of the state agencies and businesses should not spend time and resources either than paying taxes and dues. This position was also supported by professor Milton Friedman, an American economist, winner of Nobel prize in economics who argued that "There is one and only one social responsibility of business - to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud." Accordingly, M. Friedman considered that responsibility of contribution to social development and the control over this activity should be undertaken by the state and other non - commercial organizations. Though supported by M. Friedman and other theorists in 1960s this position didn't gain neither popularity nor the support of the general public. The developments in XXI century and obvious benefits of being socially responsible made this approach totally unacceptable. However, thorough analyses of Friedman theory helps to understand the essence of the main idea behind his approach: open and free competition without deception or fraud is also a sign of respect to social responsibility and ethical principles. This approach is against businesses trying to hide their illegal or unethical activity behind the so called "social responsibility". When costs hidden behind the social responsibility are higher than the investment on CSR related projects it is more unethical than not having CSR activity at all. The developmental dynamics of CSR concept presented in the following table shows that this model, which appeared in the form of small scientific research in the 50s of the 20th century, has entered into a new stage of development in the 21st century and is regulated by the standards and principles of prestigious international organizations.

*Table following on the next page*



1950–1970	Initiatives (in the form of studies and research works) proposing establishment of mechanisms regulating the social responsibility of businesses	
1980-2000	Acceleration of globalization process, appeals for establishment of environmental and social reporting	
Since 2000	Promotion of sustainable development, promotion of GRI reporting system, Dow Jones Sustainability Indices (DJSI), SA 8000, ISO 26000, AAA1000 etc.	

*Table 1: Dynamics of Evolution of CSR Concept*

By the development of society, the character of requirements posed to businesses also changes. As stated by W. Shaw, professor of San Jose State University and author of the book “Business Ethics”, in our days “The list of corporate responsibilities goes beyond such negative injunctions such as “Don’t pollute,” “Don’t misrepresent products,” and “Don’t bribe.” Included also are affirmative duties like “See that your product or service makes a positive contribution to society,” “Improve the skills of your employees,” “Seek to hire the disabled,” “Give special consideration to the needs of historically disadvantaged groups,” “Contribute to the arts and education,” “Locate plants in economically depressed areas,” “Improve working conditions.”, etc. While examining the standards contained in the Table 1 we observe that these new requirements of modern society are reflected in the relevant global standards and regulations and it demonstrates transition of CSR to a new level of development.

### **3. CSR AS A FACTOR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

Today, across the globe corporate social responsibility and ethical governance are perceived as the indicator and guarantee of the sustainable development and successful performance of a company. As we have noted above, requirements to the social responsibility of businesses becomes more serious regardless of the size and field of activity of businesses, their form of ownership, geographical location, culture and national traditions of the country they operate in. To prove it let’s review some advantages of being socially responsible. A socially responsible company:

- Can charge premium prices and gain brand loyalty because of their responsible approach towards environmental concerns;
- Can generate enduring relationships with suppliers and distributors thanks to trustworthiness demonstrated;
- Can attract talented workforce as their positive reputation makes it easier to recruit talent. High level of retention is one more strong factor of being ethical business which helps to reduce the costs of recruitment and retraining while increasing motivation and productivity;
- Can count on support of government in difficult times;
- A company is more likely to be welcomed into a foreign country when it has positive CSR reputation;
- Socially responsible companies are more likely to attract investors as strategic investors evaluate the business from different perspectives before making a decision on investment. To note that in recent years, the international ranking tables of the most successful companies are headed by the companies attaching a great respect to CSR. It can be seen from the Forbes list of World’s Most Reputable Companies of 2018: The World’s most Reputable Companies such as Google, BMW Group, Microsoft, Bosch, The Walt Disney Company, CISCO and others lead the Forbes list of socially responsible companies.



### **3.1. The impact of CSR to the sustainable development of small and medium-sized enterprises in Azerbaijan**

The concept of corporate social responsibility of enterprises, which covers compliance with the requirements for industrial safety and environmental protection, resource saving, provision of good quality products and services, ethical business conduct, investing in social welfare and community initiatives, ensuring decent and safe working conditions has been established in the theory and practice of CSR. However, small and medium sized enterprises cannot afford having the same level of CSR strategy and policy as the big companies do. Their CSR strategy may differ by its scope and components. In developed countries CSR policy has since long been recognized and CSR activities and well established non-financial reporting system is functioning while the situation in developing countries including post-soviet countries is different. The main problem of CSR policy in post-soviet countries is that majority of companies don't have in-depth understanding of social responsibility of businesses. Most of the national companies consider that their overall responsibility is limited to respecting and complying with the norms of legislation i.e. paying taxes, dues, providing related financial and tax reports about their commercial activity. However, the normative acts and legislation doesn't contend all the responsibilities, particularly social responsibilities of businesses. The international CSR regulating mechanisms developed during the last 25 years have not been totally integrated into the national legislation and here the enlightening and regulating role of the government and the non-governmental organizations are necessary to make businesses aware of their social responsibilities. The reason why CSR concept in post-soviet countries, including Azerbaijan, became actual only during the last 10 years (almost 20 years later than in developed countries) can be explained in the following way: 60 years long history of modern CSR concept shows that attention to the social responsibility of businesses increases in parallel to the economic development of a country or an entire region. This was the case in the US, in developed countries of Europe and Asia. As for Azerbaijan, there are number of political, economic and social reasons for belated attention to social responsibility of businesses. Among them are involvement of Azerbaijan in the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1990s, struggle for the independence that the country gained after being part of the Soviet Union during 70 years, the difficult period of state-building in the conditions of the long-running transformation crisis of the 1990s, the lack of sustainable economic development, demographic crisis, and the poor social environment. Moreover, in order to achieve significant progress in CSR activity, there was a need for a new mechanism that would ensure the transfer of social responsibility from the state to the business. Though this model has not yet been fully developed up to date, yet significant progress is being observed in the field of CSR activity of Azerbaijani companies during the last 10 years. It was possible to achieve as a result of awareness-raising activities, both in national legislation and on public-sector commitment to the society. So, what is the role of the CSR for SMEs in Azerbaijan? - As mentioned earlier, the concept of corporate social responsibility is a relatively new phenomenon for Azerbaijani companies. CSR in Azerbaijan has become popular only since the end of the first decade of the XXI century though the manifestation of philanthropy was part of Azerbaijani entrepreneurs at all times in the form of charity which is considered the predecessor of CSR. Thanks to social contributions of the prominent Azerbaijani Maecenas such as Haji Zeynalabdin Tagiyev, Murtuza Mukhtarov, Aga Musa Nagiyev, Shamsi Asadullayev, Nabat khanum Ashurbeyli and others a significant progress has been made in early XX century in the areas of education, art, construction, science, medicine and some other spheres. To note that Nobel Brothers are also in the list of Maecenas who contributed to the well-being of the Azerbaijani society and are glorified among those who laid the foundation of responsible and ethical business in Azerbaijan. In modern Azerbaijan, the CSR activities try to follow the global trends, while this development comes mainly to the share of big business and does not really encompass small and medium-size businesses.



Azerbaijani SMEs as a rule, limit their CSR activity to a charity of a local scale, presenting it as the main form of their social responsibility. Studies have revealed a number of reasons why small and medium-sized businesses in Azerbaijan continue to abandon their commitment to sustainable social responsibility:

- Absence of required non-financial or social reports. While reading the non-financial reports of companies worldwide we can see components that are very useful for society, for environment, for employees and other stakeholders. Some of the activities doesn't require big resources - they require responsible planning and responsibly developed implementation mechanisms.
- Lots of expenses including income taxes SMEs have to pay to stay legally responsible and they don't have enough financial, material and physical resources to invest in long-term sustainable social projects. As a result, they have to limit their CSR activity to one-time local charity activity.
- Unawareness of the necessity and benefits of being CSR oriented.
- Absence of acknowledgment for the responsible CSR practices which may serve as a strong motivation encouraging enterprises to further develop in this direction. One positive step in this direction was the first Republic Contest on CSR projects organised in October 2018 by the National Confederation of Entrepreneurs of Azerbaijan together with Eurasia International Relations and Research Studies Public Union and the related state agencies.
- Non-active civil society. The role of active and enlightened society to influence businesses is great. Some globally recognized businesses became socially responsible after the call or boycott of the society. NIKE for example became one of the internationally recognised responsible and ethical company after customers boycotted its products because of the irresponsible exploitation of child labour in sweatshops in South East Asia. After having reconsidered its policy of using cheap labour force in bad working conditions the company improved and occupied its place in the list of companies respected for their CSR strategy. Influence of society made the British Petroleum be converted into Beyond Petroleum.

In line with these shortcomings it should be noted that global improvements in CSR activity of businesses and developed frameworks and initiatives are being reflected in the CSR activity in Azerbaijan. The list of measures taken include amendments to the related laws, issued normative acts, joining global social responsibility initiatives and developing related guidelines. The following regulating and recommendation mechanisms have been developed name a few:

- Azerbaijan Corporate Governance Standards developed by the Ministry of Economic Development in cooperation with International Finance Corporation (IFC)
- "The Code of Corporate Ethics" developed by the Ministry of Economic Development in cooperation with International Finance Corporation
- Reforms carried out by the Council on State Support to NGOs
- Establishment of the Agency for Development of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
- Activity of the State Agency for Sustainable development under the Ministry of Economics.

Thanks to the taken initiatives by government certain improvements are observed in the field of CSR activity, while (as mentioned above) this development comes to the share of big businesses such as oil companies, big industries, banks and mobile operators and does not really encompass small and medium-size businesses.

#### **4. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF CSR ACTIVITY OF SMEs IN AZERBAIJAN**

The practise demonstrates that the most affordable way of the responsible self-assessment and ensuring the awareness of public about any activity goes through following the requirements,



recommendations and standards set on the given field. Therefore, the adoption of documents regulating corporate social responsibility in the country is a prerequisite for enhancing the social activities of enterprises. Accordingly, enterprises will strive to provide the public with evidence of their socially responsible activities. The first and main document that needs to be developed is standards on social reporting of enterprises and organizations functioning in the Republic of Azerbaijan. This document should be accompanied with methodological guidelines on implementation. The main advantage of adopting these standards will be encouraging companies to approach their SCR activity more responsibly. It will help to minimize the number of businesses having not made sustainable investment for social benefits and trying to appear as a socially responsible company by conducting a hastily organised charity event. Comprehensive preprinted reporting templates will help those who want to be active in CSR and to have their investments and activities more targeted and accurate but not having expertise in this field. Another important issue is providing expert support to organizations in developing and implementing their social responsibility practices. There are various national and international guidance on social, environmental and economic responsibilities such as GRI reporting system, Dow Jones Sustainability Indices (DJSI), SA 8000, ISO 26000, AAA1000 to name a few. However, preparing these reports will require providing expert support for companies. Experts may help companies in developing CSR strategy taking into consideration local conditions and the indicators of a company, surveying and identifying areas to be covered with CSR activity, identifying related indicators and then providing support to companies in drafting reports on the implemented activities. Without having expert support, a company, willing to be socially responsible and carry out related activities will fail in its endeavours and will again forced to limit their focus on spontaneous charity events to prepare a CSR report. Special attention should be paid that the prepared CSR reports are developed according to the principles reflected in the related documents of reputable international organizations. Below is a short list of the most popular providers of sustainability reporting guidance:

- The GRI (The Global Reporting Initiative - GRI) Sustainability Reporting Guidelines enable companies and organizations to report their economic, environmental, social and governance performance. A sustainability report is a report published by a company or organization about the economic, environmental and social impacts caused by its everyday activities. Sustainability reporting can help organizations to measure, understand and communicate their economic, environmental, social and governance performance, and then set goals, and manage change more effectively. A sustainability report is the key platform for communicating sustainability performance and impacts – whether positive or negative. The Guide provides a list of specific indicators for reporting on the social, environmental and other related activities of an enterprise. One of the main advantage of GRI Sustainability reports is that it is for reporting by companies and organizations of all types, sizes and sectors worldwide. In 2018 companies from all sectors across the globe have published their sustainability reports according to the standards set by GRI's Sustainability Reporting Guidelines.)
- ISO 26000 standards for social responsibility provides guidance on how businesses and organizations can operate in a socially responsible way. This guidance helps organizations to act and report in an ethical and transparent way that contributes to the health and welfare of society. However, it should be noted that ISO 26000 is different from other ISO standards that are certified. It is a guideline regardless that of being called a standard.
- SA 8000 «Social Accountability» is an auditable certification standard developed according to the recommendations of International Labour Organization that encourages organizations to develop, maintain, and apply socially acceptable practices in the workplaces. SA 800 sets criteria for evaluation of several important aspects such as child labor, forced and compulsory labor, health and safety, freedom of association and right to collective



bargaining, discrimination, disciplinary practices, working conditions and hours, remuneration. All the listed aspects are very important to be respected and reported on by small and medium size enterprises.

- One of the most important reporting standards is AA1000 which covers the whole range of necessary information in the field of sustainability. Developed and then updated in 2018 the AA1000 Accountability Principles is applicable to organizations of all types and sizes and is primarily intended for organizations intending to develop an open, accountable and strategic approach to managing sustainability performance.

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