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**Article**

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Open Access



# Corporate social responsibility. A strategy for social and territorial sustainability

Letizia Carrera\*

## Abstract

Globalization and financial processes have progressively generated an intense and problematic phenomenon of disconnection between companies and their territories. Breaking of the spatial link has often led to the breaking of the social bond and the rupture of territorial cohesion.

In order to counteract this process of progressive lack of solidarity and social trust between companies and territorial communities, a very important role can be played by Corporate Social Responsibility. From few decades the European and the national reflection was focused on "Corporate Social Responsibility" considered a fundamental strategy able to activate the (re) construction of new forms of solidarity and to create favorable conditions for social and economic sustainable growth, restoring continuity between activities and long-term effects connected to them. In this perspective, the corporate territorial welfare is its empirical expression, and a strategic tool to achieve the goal of counteract social and geographical peripherality to guarantee a polycentric and sustainable development of territories and highest level of quality of life of local communities.

To grasp this new type of relationship that companies can establish with "their" territories starting from their choices of welfare, different models of corporate welfare introduced in some companies in Puglia have been analyzed. A specific attention has been dedicated to the particular form of corporate welfare extended to the territory and therefore to territorial stakeholders. These actions, when present, go well beyond the most classic attention to employees, and can be considered opportunities to give shape or rebuild the most direct link with the territories. In order to investigate the corporates' welfare choices, we have used a qualitative methodology interviewing the human resources managers of several Apulian companies and asking them about welfare choices.

From the analysis carried out it has been possible to define a typology of enterprises in relation to the adopted model of welfare.

The objective that we intend to pursue with this ongoing research is to define a kind of open catalogue of good practices that can facilitate the choices of companies to adhere to innovative forms of corporate and territorial welfare.

**Keywords:** Corporate social responsibility, Sustainability, Solidarity, Territories, Communities quality of life

## Introduction

### The broken bond between companies and territories

The "global village" which Marshall McLuhan (1964) wrote about in the mid-1960s has become smaller and smaller, as every place has become closer and closer, not only thanks to intangible communications, but also to

the growing quality of the material ones that create ever more dense and extensive networks. The provocative oxymoron perfectly describes how much geographically distant territories have become potentially close and how much more and more individuals think globally. Companies, more than others, grasped the potential inherent in this contraction of space which is, at the same time, an expansion of opportunities and options. Therefore, this new physical and symbolic scenario produced significant

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repercussions in the relationship between companies and their territories. Until they were rooted in a territory, they were already naturally part of, or at least linked with, the communities established there. Otherwise, globalisation processes have progressively generated an intense and problematic phenomenon of disconnection between companies and their territories. Breaking of the spatial link has often led to the breaking of the social bond.<sup>1</sup> Enterprises, even medium-sized ones, have progressively become entities largely, if not entirely, independent from the boundaries of nation states, building new multinational and supranational circuits within which they play their game. Companies have recreated their space by defining and redefining the boundaries of the territories connected with their activities. Countries, even geographically far from each other, found themselves closely linked by common interests, often as competitors, to attract or retain companies and the economic return they guarantee.

The new supra-territorial dimension of companies, their ability to disregard geographical and political boundaries, produced significant consequences in terms of relations both with national laws and with the territories affected by their choices. Regarding this link, the different relationship between companies and legislations at different territorial levels led to an inversion of the hierarchy between politics and economics: compared to the classic formula of a political subsystem, which should define objectives, and to the economic one, which is required to organise resources in view of such objectives, as Alain Touraine pointed out, the economy seems to be increasingly fulfilling the function of identifying goals, forcing politics to a dramatic run-up.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to their financial dematerialisation and ability to go elsewhere, companies can exert pressure by –not so silently– blackmailing governments (Bauman, 2002). The ease with which companies can decide to relocate their activities could push them towards predatory attitudes with respect to specific territories, without considering the consequences and the negative externalities of

their choices and activities. One of the consequences is the rupture of territorial cohesion, instead increasingly understood as a strategic objective also at European level (Medeiros, 2016; 2019). Precisely in view of this centrality, it is important to give a structured definition of the concept of territorial cohesion so that it can be translated into a Territorial Cohesion Index. This, in turn, can guarantee the comparability of the results of research on different territories and, above all, be useful to policymakers and regional/local stakeholders.

This led to a contraction in the time horizon of corporate responsibility which include, in their opportunity assessments, only elements with immediate results. The medium and long-term costs related to the protection of the individuals living in territorial communities and the territories themselves, affected by the negative externalities of the companies, are thus silenced, and neglected. Therefore, territories risk becoming a short-term resource, victim of a strategic rationality deprived of any long-time horizon and value orientation, to be exploited in the principle of “here and now”, outside of any planning. This process is sometimes even strengthened by local governments themselves, which are too often engaged in short-sighted territorial marketing that lose long-term perspective for a eco-friendlier and socio-sustainable development, which involves the territory as an indispensable partner for success. This dynamic and the resulting fracture between companies and territories prevents the creation of a virtuous circle that could make the two entities mutual resources. The limits deriving from these detachment processes are manifold both in relation to ecological sustainability strategies - that involve environmental, economic, and social plans - and to the purely strategic level - linked to the Weberian logics of rationality with respect to profit, understood as the aim pursued by the company. As a matter of fact, in an increasingly interconnected socio-economic scenario, companies experience not only their physicality, but also their immaterial identity. It can place them, in different ways, in the widespread representations of consumers, starting from an imaginary that is created both by the communications conveyed by the companies themselves and by horizontal communications. Those are often mediated by social networks and by the personal evaluations of buyers, more and more required by online sales portals. The weight of this process of image-building has grown in parallel with the emergence on the economic scene of what Stefano Zamagni (1994) defined consumers-citizens<sup>3</sup>: namely, individuals committed to making

<sup>1</sup> Stefano Zamagni (2003) referred to the beautiful metaphors of Peter Drucker, which describe companies first as Egyptian pyramids, solidly rooted in the territory in which they were naturally established and with which they held economic and social exchanges, and then as tents in the desert, that could be assembled elsewhere according to the needs of their inhabitants.

<sup>2</sup> “Starting from the 1960s and especially the 1970s, global national projects were running out, paralysed internally, and attacked from the outside (...) the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (...) pushed all countries to implement structural adjustments that first of all involved the demolition of the old political controls on the economy”. Touraine Alain, *Dall'economia di mercato agli attori della produzione*, in Ceri P, Borgna P, (edited by), *La tecnologia per il XXI secolo. Prospettive di sviluppo e rischi di esclusione*, p. 28, Einaudi Editore, Torino, (1998).

<sup>3</sup> These figures can be considered as the decisive overcoming of the consumers-customers who “do not process or, above all, do not try to interact with those who make the offer and endowed with purchasing power, they choose the best option that others decided to bring to the market. Consumers-customers are only apparently free to choose: they are able to choose based on

socially responsible choices in their consumption behaviour and who intend to build their “demand” also in view of ethical values. Committed consumers, looking at the environmental and social repercussions of their consumption choices, consciously decide to exercise their power in view of objectives of social, humanitarian, and environmental relevance: in other words, consumers whose rationality, as argued by (Cassano (2004): 22), is “crossed and tempered by other rationalities, avoiding in this way to leave society unprotected in the face of the will of the market”. The emergence of this new figures in the economic scenario represented one of the factors capable of creating a strong impetus for the introduction of an ethical dimension in the classic evaluations of economic opportunity, particularly in relation to marketing and commercial strategies. Alongside these figures, who, more or less consciously, exert a bottom-up pressure towards responsible choices on the companies, there is a growing and widespread awareness at the political level. It has grown also thanks to theoretical reflections on national and supranational regulations, in relation to social and environmental values, which until a few decades ago were part of the priorities of governments and of the most far-sighted public or private decision makers. This top-down process is linked to the first one by the idea of the necessary ethical dimension of the economy. It is considered capable of limiting the increased power of conditioning and influencing held by companies, especially by those multinationals that have a weak and ephemeral bond with their territories and with local socio-economic development processes.

It is no coincidence that, starting from the 1950s, business ethics<sup>4</sup> experienced a rapid development until it established itself as an independent discipline and found its recognition also in the academic field and, in more recent times, also within work-related and normative fields, following a widespread impetus at European level. For a long time, there has been a flourishing of ethical codes understood as forms of self-regulation of organisations and conceived as a guiding criterion in making

choices and developing strategies that are eco-friendly and socio-sustainable. At the same time, the classic strategy of companies evolved, from a purely economic evaluation toward a more complex evaluation of social objectives and results. The complexity that characterises every attempt to introduce corrective measures into the economic logic is now well-known. As already observed, the ethical dimension has been recognised as a significant value that merges into an economic value, also substantiated by reputation and from the image that the company itself can have in different markets.

This perspective has linked economic dimension with cultural one. The result was the creation of opportunities and premises for significant changes, capable to ensure high levels of competitiveness. New meanings enter the organisational logics, so that they become regulatory principles of organisational action, affecting the structural dimensions of the company itself (Molteni, 2008). Indeed, to be effective, these codes should affect the deeper principles that guide the organisational logic. Any choice or change that does not affect what Edgar Schein (2010) defines as “tacit and shared assumptions” are bound to prove their ineffectiveness over time. Economy is thus urged to take up a more complex role within the broader social dynamics, once again integrated by systemic logics that can hold together the often-conflicting interests of the different parties involved in the various issues and that are able to generate significant impacts on individuals’ life and territories. In this direction, the adoption of practices of responsible territorial development strategies, able to reconcile tendencies that appear contradictory –if considered in the short term-, becomes fundamental. These complex dynamics represent the essential basis for the recovery of a solidarity bond between the companies and the territories in which they are established. The focus on a peculiar relational dimension of the company, starts from the awareness that “the economic aspects of specific decisions cannot be isolated from their repercussions on the community” (Giaretta, 2000: 51). The company recognises a social subjectivity that places it fully among the references of the territory and its government. Virtuous paths of governance rather than government can thus be created (Pichierri, 2002): these ones could represent a common opportunity for social and political growth through the adoption of cooperative strategies.

### Corporate social responsibility

The European and then the national reflection on “Corporate Social Responsibility”, CSR as it is mentioned in international documents and guidelines, is part of this project of (re) construction of new forms of solidarity between companies and territories. It found its regulatory

Footnote 3 (continued)

their own preferences, but these are maximally manipulable. As a matter of fact, the demand for goods derives basically from the demand for well-being: this depends on the subjective perception, which is affected not only by economic variables (prices, incomes, assets), but also by the “availability effect” - the variations in supply lead, at least to a certain extent, to variations in demand - and by the “overall choice effect” - the access opportunities condition the consumers-customers preferences, just like in the parable of “sour grapes” and the theory of cognitive dissonance” (Zamagni, 2003: 4).

<sup>4</sup> International research conducted by management and business schools and universities had already revealed 20 years ago the increase in the number of business ethics courses included in the various study programmes, as well as in the number of students interested in those courses (McHugh 1988).

structure in the Green Book of the European Commission of 2001, which defines it as “voluntary integration by companies of social and environmental concerns into their commercial activities and their relations with stakeholders” (point 20). The aim is guaranteeing a “more competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (point 6). CSR is the only relatively recent result of the awareness of how much it is possible to achieve public objectives also in the market, allowing both companies and consumers to carry out their production and consumption activities in accordance with their own ethical guidelines (Carrera, 2005). There is no doubt, however, that the attention to the dimensions that CSR implies, paradoxically in the same period of a widespread shift towards neoliberal positions, turned out to be increasingly central (Freeman et al., 2006). According with what is stated on the website of the Ministry of Labour “by renewing the efforts to promote CSR, the European Commission intends to create favourable conditions for sustainable growth, ethically responsible behaviour of companies, and the creation of lasting employment in the medium and long term, also through a new corporate governance, which must look at the human and social capital of local communities as a form of sustainable investment”.

A growing literature has emphasised the long-term transformation of this concept (Carroll, 2021; Idowu et al. 2017; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Matten & Moon, 2020; Windsor, 2021). This transformation is the result of a process of cultural change in scientific, public and media<sup>5</sup> debates (Aslaksen et al., 2021; Paul & Parra, 2021) but, at the same time, the wide reflection on CSR has been a push factor of this change.

Corporate Social Responsibility is a product of the post-World War II period, starting from the growing consciousness about civil rights of different kinds of citizens and moreover, next generations at social and environmental level. Starting from ‘60, there has been a growing diffusion of the theme both in the awareness of entrepreneurs, in terms of regulatory recognition and in the attention of political and academic analysis. While CSR was initially the object of individual sensibility and attention, of entrepreneurs setting up charitable projects, it has increasingly considered a broader and a more structured concept, thus assuming a global relevance. Today the institutionalization of CSR is very evident through the presence of specific dedicated corporate functions as CR Officer, CSR Officer, Director of Sustainability,

Director of Philanthropy, Compliance and Ethics Officers (Carroll, 2015; Carroll, 2021). CSR has moved out of the dichotomy between category of altruism at one extreme and the strategic rationalizations at the other one. The key point seems to be the new consideration of CSR as an example of the inextricable link between companies and societies imagined as connected by a virtuous economic and social bond. This responsibility of enterprises has become still more evident and emphasized from the terminological choice to use the definition of Corporate Citizenship. Even if in terms of content and meaning, it represents is substantially like CSR, it represents a useful a metaphor. Companies like citizens have responsibilities and duties (Carroll, 2015). This is therefore the proof of a semantic shift from the “Business and Society” model to that of “Business in Society” one.<sup>6</sup>

Discourses are always embedded in specific socio-political and cultural environments, and the main topics of CSR have altered in the course of time (Mark-Ungericht & Weiskopf, 2007) as result of an ongoing debate of different and even competing meanings and narrations. This new representation of the link between companies and communities is based on a new and more widespread assumption of responsibility that aims to counter or, realistically, at least to stem, the behaviors and the choices of companies oriented only to profit. The need for cultural and regulatory intervention is rooted in the awareness discussed by Luciano Gallino (2005) that the irresponsible enterprise is a kind of direct filiation of managerial capitalism. Within this model, company for intrinsic and structural reasons tends to operate in an irresponsible way. Among the unethical behaviors of the company that have direct repercussions on the employees, first stakeholders of the company and “internal customers”, are to be counted the choices related to human resources: «The company employs as little as possible and tends to lay off in order to create value; it aims to retain and to acquire loyalty only of a small core of staff; it employs a high percentage of precarious or floating workers; prefers to use the available resources for financial operations rather than for new investments» (Gallino, 2005, 124).

From this risky process derives the necessity to create paths, also binding, of full assumption of responsibility by the enterprises in order to achieve goals deeply linked with sustainability, also going beyond the theoretical validity of the voluntary character of this choice. Even if this concept has recently been criticized for being an “empty signifier”, which means that while appearing to address fundamental concerns, it means very little

<sup>5</sup> Media is considered an important third part that forms and reflects public opinion about business responsibility (Burke, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> «These primary frameworks include corporate social responsibility, (...) business ethics (CE), stakeholder management (SM), corporate citizenship (CC), and sustainability (SUS)» (Carroll, 2015: 90).

in particular and could be subject to radically different interpretations (Brown 2016), it still retains its theoretical and practical relevance. In the same way, despite from an empirical standpoint, it remains unclear whether there is any actual convergence between the numerous codes, standards and frameworks available to guide sustainable organisations, many claim that the reporting of sustainability performance indicators (de Cambourg, 2019; GRI and USB, 2020; IFRS Foundation, 2020; KPMG, 2017) is nearing a tipping point (Coulmont et al., 2022).

Companies should consider an innovative and more responsible triple bottom line of reporting and of the planning itself. It should be capable of incorporating the concept of sustainable development in the evaluation of performances, starting from the identification of more complex indicators of an economic (ability to produce income, profits and employment), social (ability to guarantee conditions of well-being and fair and supportive growth, in compliance with human and labor rights) and environmental nature (ability to guarantee reproducibility and quality of natural resources) (Perrini, 2006, 2007; Perrini & Tencati 2008). Companies should reconsider themselves in terms that go beyond the purely economic logic and, consequently, to also reconsider their interlocutors: "Corporate social responsibility extends beyond the doors of the company into the local community and involves a wide range of stakeholders in addition to employees and shareholders: business partners and suppliers, customers, public authorities and NGOs representing local communities, as well as the environment" (Green Paper 2001: point 42). In this perspective, the concept of stakeholder involves not only the entire community located in the area but the widespread civil society. The *stakeholder theory*, moreover, arises precisely from a play on words aimed at underlining the comparison, and at the same time the distancing from the previous *theory of stockholders*. The latter can be traced back to Friedman who, in the 1960s, argued that the sole purpose of the company is to produce profit, albeit within a fair competitive game and in compliance with the law. The stakeholder theory, on the other hand, introduced the ethical value into the purely economic logic that characterized the previous theory and included as referents towards which the company considers itself responsible "all the individuals with whom it has a relationship and who, in various ways, affect the business" (Giaretta, 2000: 44). In this new perspective, the management is linked by a fiduciary relationship not only with the shareholders, but also with other entities and individuals and the responsibility of the company is extended beyond the bottom line, that is "beyond the last line of the balance sheet". The transition from the stockholder theory to the more post-Fordist one of stakeholders configures

a substantial change in the very logic of the company on some strategic issues: responsibility, the reference time horizon, the types of benefits and associated costs. As Pelanda and Savona (2005) observe, it deals with the planning and coordination of a synergistic action between companies and stakeholders, not only current but also potential ones, and therefore investors, employees, suppliers, consumers, trade unions, institutions, associations, environmentalists and the third sector, community of the territory, aimed at building and preserving difficult but necessary alliances between entities and individuals who often have apparently different interests. The new perspective broadens the number of entities and individuals to which companies are called to respond, to include all those affected in various ways by the activities, choices and wider effects linked to the entrepreneurial activity, deficiency, or inactivity. Corporate social responsibility appears as a dynamic process of "progressive acquisition of reference horizons" (Ibid.). This represents the transition from an initial social irresponsibility position to the assumption of responsibility, not only an economic one, related to any negative externalities depending on the specific entrepreneurial action. Central is the change that has taken place between the old and the new CSR model (Auld et al., 2008: 415 ff). In the older one, efforts are largely focused on corporate philanthropic activities that usually had little to do with the firm's core business practices. Instead, the new CSR is squarely focused on internalizing firm negative externalities, and, in this perspective, the next generation of CSR has the potential to become an effective tool within domestic and global environmental and social governance.

With this shift, companies are obliged to dialogue with the wider social and territorial environment and thus, in addition to that spatial expansion of responsibility, its temporal extension is required, restoring continuity between activities and long-term effects connected to them (Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). This different orientation redefines deeply the parameters of costs and benefits that fall within the considerations of opportunity, incorporating the medium and long-term effects and the repercussions that otherwise would not appear in the costs of the organization, falling instead on territories and individuals, and not only those directly concerned. In this perspective, the theme of CSR remains deeply linked to the objective of (re) building the conditions for a high degree of territorial cohesion. For too long time, the uncertainty derived from the plurality of definitions, despite Faludi's opinion (Faludi, 2009), has led to problems of comparability of results and excessive autonomy for the companies involved in this goal. To overcome these problems, Medeiros proposes a definition of "territorial cohesion": «the process of promoting a more

cohesive and balanced territory, by: (i) supporting the reduction of socioeconomic territorial imbalances; (ii) promoting environmental sustainability; (iii) reinforcing and improving the territorial cooperation/governance processes; and (iv) reinforcing and establishing a more polycentric urban system» (2016, 24) which appears able to orient the definition of a statistical index that can better orient the EU Cohesion Policy in achieving the goal of territorial cohesion at regional, national and European levels.

Until now, the widespread orientation aimed at not considering companies responsible for the negative externalities brought into territories confirmed the analysis carried out by Ulrich Beck 30 years ago when he wrote (1992) about the “society of the consequences of the secondary consequences”. In this society, the effects of the choices are often temporally and spatially detached from the choices themselves, ending up involving actors who had no part in the process of choice in any way. Following these reflections, the current one increasingly appears to be a Luhmanian “society of risk” for some and a “society of danger” for others, where the substantial difference between the two terms is to be found in the category of decision, which is taken and chosen in the first case while not in the second one (Luhmann, 1996). In this perspective, CSR is configured as an important step towards a greater social subjectivity of both companies, which are called to become responsible also for problems that affect the territories, even when such problems are not ascribable to their direct activity, and of the same territories that are called to dialogue and build relationships and spaces for discussion with companies.

The last half decades have witnessed a remarkable resurgence of attention to understanding the functionality of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to address environmental and social problems (Auld et al., 2008). To achieve this goal, the adoption of ethical codes, therefore, should evolve towards the consolidation of the commitment to engage in socially responsible behaviors, starting from the local community. CSR is thus presented as a virtuous synthesis between *top down* national and supranational regulatory indications and *bottom-up* needs and initiatives starting from national and international best practices (such as the transparency of financial statements and procedures for identifying suppliers and commercial partners, a constant attention to human resources and their enhancement as well as social and environmental reports). CSR is presented as a complex and ambitious project, whose success is as difficult as desirable and for which a critical but essential step is constituted by the passage from the regulatory and planning phase to the implementation one in which such this composite idea should be translated into

operational practices. As far as the implementation phase concerns some of the problems highlighted by the companies themselves, first the lack of tools, know-how and economic resources to devote to these projects. These problems represent a cultural challenge rather than an economic one, with regards to multinational companies due to their characteristics that make them more independent from the territory than medium and small-sized ones. In this sense, it would be desirable to offer widespread and common tools for environmental management, which could be used as stringent reference criteria for a large number and for different types of companies, while respecting their specific characteristics.

CSR can transform market behavior and ultimately be a significant force for social and environmental change and, at the same time, can may represent an economic advantage for the enterprises themselves. As Luis Moreno pointed out about women work-life balance strategies, «the case for reconciliation of work and family responsibilities illustrate how those “meeting points” between welfare and CSR can advance citizenship and optimize business activities» (2010: 691).

#### **Territorial corporate welfare**

Corporate welfare can refer to a broad concept of recipients, both internal and external, who are involved in the company core activity, which is to be understood not as a mere exchange, but rather as a response to the rights of workers and the territory, conceived in a holistic ecological perspective. Corporate welfare does not contradict public welfare as it rather tends to enrich it by increasing the capacity of the overall system to respond to the demand for the well-being of the territories. A corporate welfare plan can bring benefits to the company and workers (Tessema et al., 2013). It can improving the corporate attention to the environment, increasing the well-being and attractiveness of the company towards potential new human resources, increasing the ability to retain its employees, improving the company’s reputation in terms of employer branding, increasing its productivity and the quality of its reputation on the market.<sup>7</sup> In this perspective, the ability of companies to communicate the contents of their welfare plan related to internal and external stakeholders is also fundamental.<sup>8</sup> After all, starting from the «embeddedness theory» of Granovetter (1993),

<sup>7</sup> It is essential to refer to the famous corporate welfare model conceived by Adriano Olivetti, who had the ambition to assist his workers in all aspects of both company and family life, having clear how important it was to invest in the well-being of his employees and in the sense of shared community, rather than focusing exclusively on profit (Olivetti & Cadeddu, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Paciello D., Progetto EQUiPE 2020- Efficienza e Qualità del Sistema, Innovazione, Produttività e Equilibrio vita-lavoro.

behaviors and economic situations are so embedded in social relationships that considering them independently is a serious mistake. Because of this, many economic and cooperate actions escape from pure computational rationality and are instead rooted in systems of concrete and active social and personal relationships. These characteristics determine the particular configuration that assumes an economic relations system. This system of relations also explains behaviors not strictly utilitarian (Moro, 1998) as the CSR ones.

After the orientation in the direction of Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism and the marginalisation of corporate welfare choices (Grandi, 2014), recently the attention has shifted to corporate welfare plans, especially those of large companies that had both a specific corporate culture and the resources to implement targeted interventions. After all, also medium-sized and even more small-sized companies, are demonstrated a growing attention to corporate welfare considered as strategic tool to improve the quality of their relationship with employers and with territories where they are rooted. For these enterprises, corporate welfare could be a very difficult goal to achieve because of their characteristics as the reduced number of employees -and therefore of potential beneficiaries-, the extreme fragmentation on the territory. These characteristics make it difficult to implement good practices, due to the huge effort to coordinate the various offices- and the distrust of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs to take part in associations, caused by the fear of not being able to check the whole process.

As emerged from the research realized in the Apulian industrial territory, the solution for small and medium-sized enterprises could lie in the construction of inter-company welfare plans that involve public actors together with enterprises and trade unions, to achieve those economies of scale discouraged by the small size. Work-life balance is an important part of corporate welfare opportunities and an important condition for the implementation of functional strategies to reconcile private and work needs, often through a link with the cooperative world to ensure a quality working life (Pavolini, 2016). In this context, the importance of corporate territorial welfare is central as, at least in part, a sort of the most empirical expression of CSR. The Territorial Corporate Welfare is also a strategic tool to achieve the goal of counteract social and geographical peripherality (Faludi, 2010; Luukoneen, 2010). To guarantee a polycentric and socio sustainable development of territories, and highest level of quality of life of communities that live there. This is, in a political perspective, the implementation of the *principle of territorial democracy* as the objective of the different territorial subjects (Carrera, 2020). This principle refers to the right to live quality spaces, equipped with services

and opportunities regardless of the specific portion of the territory in which you live. This becomes particularly important for urban, suburban and peri urban spaces (Colleoni and Caiello, 2013; Colleoni, 2019) characterized by deep differences. The limit to be exceeded is the segmentation of the territory divided into privileged and quality areas (generally the real and symbolic centers of cities) with a high endowment of territorial services, and areas without those same characteristics (generally the suburbs) in which residents must move to take advantage of those services, or in the event of impossibility, be forced to give them up.

Mauro Magatti observes how much «even today, the social polarizations between the center and the periphery remain conspicuous, and for some even strengthened by the dynamics associated with the knowledge economy. Beyond the irenic narratives about the “creative city”, the development of the advanced tertiary sector tends, in fact, to accentuate the differences between the globalized knowledge workers and the poor workers of the peripheries, as first highlighted by Saskia Sassen in his studies of global cities» (Magatti 2020, p.87).

The spatial and symbolic distance between the quality territories and the most deprived ones assumes for the most socially fragile subjects, more than for other citizens, particularly concrete traits and generators of negative consequences because of their specific vulnerabilities. Condition this that at least a part of these subjects lives as a real social wound. In this perspective, the deep change of meanings attributed to CSR represents a fundamental step able to represent a strategy of valorization of the territories starting from their requalification and to significantly affect the quality of life of the citizens, contrasting their *peripherality*.

The *next generation of CSR* has the potential to become an effective tool within domestic and global environmental and social governance (Auld et al., 2008: 415 ff.). If older efforts were largely focused on corporate philanthropic activities that usually had little to do with the firm's core business practices, the new CSR is more connected with them and squarely focused on internalizing a firm's negative externalities. The principle of responsibility has been incorporated in the same activities of the company, even if it doesn't neglect the proposals offered to the territory. The objective of territorial cohesion is linked to the strengthening of the social capital of the territory. It is represented by those characteristics of civil society such as culture, prevailing attitudes, consensus, trust, the widespread values that increasingly seem to constitute the competitive advantage of certain comma regions and of the companies established in them, compared to others (Moro, 1998).



The new CSR wants to find a way to address an environmental or social challenge. For this reason, its definition requires sufficient elasticity, going beyond every static definition apparently easy to operationalize, but that exposes to the risk of not giving account of any dynamic change within firms' choices and decisions. Within this new way of conceptualizing CSR there are at least seven ideal types of innovations: individual firm efforts; individual firm and individual NGO agreements; public-private partnership; information-based approaches; environmental management systems (EMSs); industry association corporate codes of conduct; private-sector hard law known as nonstate market-driven (NSMD) governance. Even if not all examples fit easily into a category, «we argue that disentangling these differences is critical to addressing questions about effectiveness - the ultimate concern of most analyses - including what firm support means for direct impacts (both short and long term) and longer-term transformation via learning across stakeholders» (Auld et al., 2008: 417).

#### **Welfare good practices in the Apulian territory**

Research carried out in 2019 which involved some Apulian companies<sup>9</sup> revealed a plurality of interventions carried out by some companies, which were aimed both at their employees and, albeit more rarely, at the territory in which they are located. The object of the survey was to measure the level and quality of innovation, and, within this topic, a specific space was dedicated to corporate and territorial welfare created by companies, intended as a resource for innovation itself.

The analysis of the selected case studies showed how much most of the enterprises address the actions of welfare to the employees and to their territory the local area, considering these choices more resources rather than costs. 1) Acquedotto Pugliese (AQP)<sup>10</sup> devotes a great attention to corporate welfare with a focus on the family, as evidenced by several initiatives such as, for instance, job orientation for children, scholarships, contributions for nursery schools and free check-ups for female employees. Furthermore, working hours have been organised in a flexible way in favour of the work-life balance of its employees. 2) Edilportale,<sup>11</sup> a relatively young and innovative company, whose distinctive trait is

creativity, invests less in terms of welfare, while it offers to its young employees' team building courses, coaching courses and a series of meetings open to employees in which ongoing projects and company indicators are shared. 3) Masmec<sup>12</sup> presents itself as a company with highly inclusive characteristics centred on listening to employees and their needs. Here, the attention is drawn to cultural opportunities through the distribution of tickets to attend the shows of the main theatres in Bari, but also a great deal of attention is paid to the sponsorship of cultural events linked to the territory. To make the company a place of personal growth, and not only a workplace, a course entitled "Effective Parenting" was also launched. Corporate welfare is also managed through a dedicated platform that allows each employee to take advantage not only of the classic vouchers, but also of services such as travel, sports and free time, training courses, reimbursement of the costs of schoolbooks and medical expenses. In addition to a more usual personal time bank, a *solidarity hour bank* has been set up: it consists in the voluntary transfer of holidays or permits in favour of colleagues who request them for particularly serious situations. 4) Merck Serono<sup>13</sup> also provides orientation courses for the children of employees, meetings on well-being and psychophysical health as well as flexible working hours for study permits and family days. Other companies such as 5) Rete Bari Gas<sup>14</sup> and 6) Icam<sup>15</sup> do not indicate specific interventions on the welfare level, which is limited to flexible working hours and internal research on corporate well-being.

Even with the limitations connected to a research on some specific case studies, the scenario that emerged allowed to define four types of companies: a) "selective" companies, that address their welfare exclusively to workers, considered as the sole referents of the business, and have a traditional and limited company welfare system; b) "balanced" companies, that try to offer different services capable of improving the quality of life of workers, so as to allow them to organise better; c) "family-oriented" companies, that also address to families directly, guaranteeing services dedicated to them, beyond those related to work-life balance; and, although present to a more

<sup>9</sup> The research "INNOVARE INSIEME. Innovazione, organizzazione e benessere dei lavoratori" [INNOVATING TOGETHER. Innovation, organization, and workers' well-being] was realized in 2019 by the CGIL Study Centre in Bari and the Rita Maierotti Apulia Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> The Apulian Aqueduct is the public infrastructure for drinking water supply in the Apulia region and in some municipalities of Campania.

<sup>11</sup> Ediportale is the first Italian technical information portal for construction. The most authoritative and complete free source of news, technical regulations, national and international regulation.

<sup>12</sup> Masmec is an Italian company specialized in robotic and mechatronic technologies, applied to the automotive and biomedical sectors.

<sup>13</sup> Merck Serono is the biopharmaceutical division of Merck, a global group specializing in innovative, high-tech products in the chemical and pharmaceutical sectors.

<sup>14</sup> Rete Gas Bari deals with the design and construction of extensions of natural gas distribution network at the service of the city of Bari and connected plants.

<sup>15</sup> ICAM deals with automatic solutions for the storage, distribution, and sale of goods.

limited extent, d) “territory-oriented” companies, capable of addressing corporate welfare also to the territory.

The absence of agreements between companies, and between these and local administration or third sector associations could be considered the greatest element of weakness of the corporate welfare system. It could be overcome by the activation of aggregate services and greater connection among enterprises and with their territories in terms of widespread social responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

The objective of spreading a culture of corporate social and territorial responsibility remains central for the development of a social and territorial context to achieve goals as continuous training, work organisation, equal opportunities, sustainable social territorial development. As well as the activation of responsible development strategies, capable of ensuring a strong impact on particularly problematic areas. A company's choices of social responsibility would represent an important resource for the improvement of the quality of life of the territories and the communities settled therein. It can represent a strategy toward the strengthening of territorial cohesion, of solidarity and community values (Fukuyama, 1996), fundamental for “rebuilding society as common property and common responsibility” (Bauman, 2002: 112).

## Conclusion

The Corporate Social Responsibility is an important strategic criterion for the social and economic planning that can profoundly affect the quality and the level of cohesion of the territories and the well-being of the communities established on them. This complex and ever-changing concept needs to be rewritten to improve a growing quality of political and economic processes of social change that affect territories at different levels.

For this reason, as Luciano Gallino clearly stated (Gallino, 2005), it is necessary to define a precise and structured conceptual architecture and, starting from this, an equally structured regulatory architecture. For a long time, in fact, the proliferation of documents, conferences, ethical codes have been accompanied by the persistence of behaviors rather unethical or even “irresponsible”. Contradiction stigmatized by Gallino when he titled the first chapter of his volume on irresponsible enterprise (Gallino, 2005) «The “corporate social responsibility” between ideal principles and real scandals». Certainly, the very nature of corporate social responsibility justifies the theoretical perspective of its voluntary adherence, but it cannot be forgotten that over time the

voluntary or self-regulatory approach has shown many limitations, starting from a completely limited ability to contrast the predatory behaviors. It therefore seems that a widespread and effective practice of CSR should presuppose a specific reform of corporate governance and a regulatory intervention that makes it mandatory and can monitor the process. As Adriano Olivetti had already guessed in the mid-nineties, it is a question of placing new legal constraints indispensable to the new structure of society and the capitalist model. The goal is to find a *third way* to the “crisis of freedom”, in search of a composition between the rights of companies and the necessary overcoming of the limits of individualistic society. The dramatic examples of irresponsible enterprises, in fact, show clearly that we are not simply faced with a problem of people, of individual managers ready to commit “white collar crimes”, wrongly called *victimless crimes*. Rather, it is a structural process, scientifically constructed, of a specific corporate governance model. «The point is that irresponsible enterprise too often presents itself as the mind and the arm of contemporary capitalism» (Gallino, 2005, XVIII).

This awareness poses and imposes the need for policies that recognize the centrality of the objective of CSR, but also that intervene actively to ensure it and to ensure the well-being of society in a logic of expanded welfare. This is based on the need for a dialogue with the territories starting from the overcoming of the idea of Europe as a “club of member states” (Conzelmann, 2008; Marks, 1992).

In this perspective, CSR can play a very strategic role in relation to the objective of territorial cohesion, which is increasingly central to European policies (Begg, 2010; Nyssen & Deckert, 2021). This could perhaps also help to support the theme in terms of scientific and political analysis that still seems weaker than it could be (Medeiros, 2016).

Also, this last reflection shows how much the CSR represents an indispensable normative and cultural instrument to operate on the various plans that involve the relationship of the enterprises and the communities with the territories as «concrete element of a human brotherhood made by the solidarity of the community of traditions and events» (Olivetti, 1945, 37). The goal to aim to is very ambitious: to create the conditions for enterprises able to synthesize social and economic perspectives, looking for a *third path* that bonds together economic success and individual quality of life. «An industry can be conceived by the Management Board as a profit-making tool, but as Known by sociologists and economists, the best industrial organizations have taken a more humane and complete appearance and consistency when the head was moved not by such economic motives, but the ambition to achieve a work of

<sup>16</sup> As noted, this limit appears -at least in part- less accentuated in the ongoing research personally directed in the context of the activities of the Mass Media, Society and Market Observatory and the Urbalab - Urban Studies Laboratory of the University of Bari.

high social or technical value or that meets both these needs (...) Only under these conditions a pluralist and free society is the creator of an authentic civilization, eliminates disorder, inequalities, the rupture between the social and the economic, between the beautiful and the useful, between the just and the human» (Olivetti, 1945 (2021), 49, 56).

The CSR is therefore an important tool able to allow companies and territories to *lengthen their gaze* going beyond the limits of strategies centered on the “here and now” and that, in view of the goal of maximizing profit, risk adopting marketing models and *short-sighted* entrepreneurial and territorial policies. These policies have a predatory attitude to corporate locations, they also end up not maximizing long-term shareholder value (Faludi, 2013).

Every normative and social tool for responsible enterprises thus becomes the necessary bridge towards a model of territorial cohesion that includes social and spatial protection. As Simin Davoudi (2005) wrote, the emphasis on this territorial cohesion can potentially reconceptualize European spatial policy by adding to it a spatial and social justice dimension.

An important possibility is given by the opportunity to extend the concept of CSR beyond the defined classic limits of territory starting from its recontextualization (Elden, 2010; Jessop et al., 2008) bringing the focus back to the community and to the conditions for consolidating or rebuilding ties (Agnew, 1994). The objective of involving the different actors in the shared project of ensuring territorial cohesion (Amin et al., 1992; Medeiros, 2014; Mirwaldt et al., 2009) and the socio-environmental quality of the territory itself, becomes an essential strategic element of the socio-economic-territorial planning process, also in view of a polycentric and sustainable development of the territories.

#### Abbreviations

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility; CR: Officer Corporate Responsibility Officer; EU: European Union; NGOs: Non Governative Organizations; CGIL: Confederazione Generale Italiana Lavoratori (Italian General Confederation of Workers).

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