Corporate social responsibility communication for both business and societal sustainability in ten South African organisations

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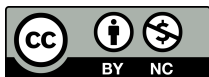
Abstract

In the context of South Africa as a developing country, we argue that CSR communication should contribute to both business sustainability and the empowerment of society for societal sustainability. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of senior South African communication practitioners regarding sustainability and the practice of CSR communication to support dual sustainability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten senior communication practitioners responsible for CSR and/or CSR communication in ten national and international organisations across South Africa.

Our findings revealed that although all practitioners recognised sustainability as the purpose of CSR, business sustainability was prioritised, while societal sustainability has only been supported. CSR communication was primarily used to enhance business sustainability by portraying the company as a responsible corporate citizen through corporate communication efforts to enhance its reputation. This is attributed to the fact that the current CSR communication theory is based on corporate communication, which prioritises business objectives.

We contend that a more comprehensive theoretical framework, including principles of development communication, would enable CSR communication to significantly contribute to societal sustainability.

Keywords

Business sustainability, corporate communication, CSR, CSR communication, development communication, empowerment, societal sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is widely recognised as an essential aspect of sustainable business practices (ElAlfy, Palaschuck, El-Bassiouny, Wilson & Weber, 2020; ISO, 2010; Schönherr, Findler & Martinuzzi, 2017; UN, 2015). In this article, we distinguish between business and societal sustainability. In business sustainability the emphasis is predominantly on the benefits of CSR for the business, which centres on enhancing corporate reputation and legitimacy. In contrast, societal sustainability prioritises the empowerment of society. In this article, we explore the extent to which current CSR strategies and CSR Communication practices in South Africa contribute to both business and societal sustainability.

In recent years, the concept of CSR in South Africa has evolved from a narrow focus on business sustainability to a more integrated approach that considers the role of businesses in society within the context of the triple bottom line (the economical, societal and environmental context in which the organisation operates) (IoD, 2016). In developing countries like South Africa, it is argued that corporate organisations should contribute to sustainable development through CSR, as government and other development agencies are insufficiently able to address social concerns (Blagov & Petrova-Savchenko,

2021; Rashed & Shah, 2021).

Mindell (2022) defines CSR strategy as "the comprehensive plan companies and funders use to design, execute, and analyse their corporate social responsibility initiatives". The CSR strategy should direct an organisation's CSR, making it an essential part of the business's overall strategy. In developing countries, CSR strategies should prioritise dual sustainably, for the benefit of both business and society. For CSR communication to support CSR strategies that focus on both business and societal sustainability, communication efforts should also be directed towards this dual sustainability. However, the field of CSR communication has remained primarily focused on business sustainability, rooted in the sphere of corporate communication where the aim is to communicate *about* business's CSR practices to different stakeholders (Grunig & Grunig, 2000:304) in ways that can benefit the organisation. We argue that to meet the dual requirement of CSR strategies in a developing country, CSR communication could be expanded to contribute to societal sustainability as well (Verk, Golob & Podnar, 2021). This can be achieved by utilising principles of development communication to communicate with participating stakeholders *within* CSR initiatives, with a focus on empowering society.

This study aimed to explore how current CSR communication practices in South Africa support the sustainability of business and society by examining the perspectives of selected communication practitioners. We investigated how sustainability is viewed, how it is incorporated into the CSR strategy, whom the communication practitioners identify as CSR stakeholders, and how they practice engaging with the stakeholders in support of the CSR strategy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study first examined sustainability and CSR strategy in the context of developing countries, before exploring the role of CSR stakeholders and the practice of CSR communication.

Sustainability, CSR strategy, and CSR stakeholders

Various international and national guidelines and reports direct South African organisations to operate as responsible businesses. These guidelines and reports provide standards and practices that are integrated into an organisation's CSR strategy. The foundation of many of these guidelines and reports can be traced back to Carroll's four-part definition of CSR. Carroll's definition emphasises the economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility a business has toward society (Carroll, 1991). These responsibilities, outlined in Carroll's definition, continue to be redefined in line with the latest trends in CSR.

On an international level, ISO 26000 (ISO, 2010) defines (C)SR as "... the responsibility of an organisation for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparency and ethical behaviour that contributes to sustainable development, including health and welfare of society; takes into account the expectation of stakeholders; is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour, and is integrated throughout the organisation and practices in its relationship". The South African Bureau of Standards has endorsed and adopted the ISO 26000 definition of CSR, as outlined in the SANS 26000 document (SANS, 2010). This highlights the importance for South African organisations to prioritise their contribution towards sustainable development.

In South Africa, the fourth King Report on Corporate Governance (King IV) (IoD, 2016) provides guidance on how to contribute to sustainable development. It is explained in terms of the triple context, as "... intentionally interacting with, and responding to, the opportunities and challenges presented by the dynamic system of the triple context (economy, society and environment) in which the organisation operates and the capital (financial, manufactured, intellectual human, social and relationship and natural capital) that the organisation uses and affects, to achieve the creation of value over time". This approach is in line with Porter and Kramer's (2006; 2011) theory on the creation of shared value as a business strategy to create a competitive advantage for the organisation, while advancing the communities in which the business operates.

ISO 26000 (ISO, 2010) and King IV (IoD, 2016) portray sustainable development as an integrated

business approach, simultaneously addressing all three elements of the triple context, presenting organisations as an integral part of society with connectivity and interdependency between the two. They also imply that the organisation's contribution to sustainable development is an ongoing process, rather than a series of once-off activities or projects.

This integrated approach to sustainability is reflected in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which outlines the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be addressed in an integrated manner (UN, 2015). Although the Agenda does not focus specifically on CSR, this "universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere" explicitly highlights the private sector as one of the most important avenues for implementing the goals. Building on the crucial role of the business sector in achieving the SDGs, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) compiled a document called *SDG Compass: The guide for business action on the SDGs* to "guide companies on how they can align their strategies as well as measure and manage their contribution to the SDGs" (GRI, UNGC & WBCSD, 2015). This document and a variety of others clarify how the business sector can use the SDGs to guide their CSR. ElAlfy et al. (2020), explain the link between CSR and the SDGs by indicating that "the SDGs have shifted CSR discourse from being reactive to stakeholders' mandates to a proactive one that helps firms play an interactive role in influencing sustainable development trajectories". Different scholars studied the relationship between the Sustainable Development Agenda and CSR initiatives and found that by integrating the SDGs in a CSR strategy, business can address sustainable development issues in society whilst also benefiting in the process (see ElAlfy et al., 2020; Schönherr et al., 2017).

If South African organisations' CSR is expected to address societal sustainability, the question is: Who in society should benefit from CSR? King IV describes society as "the organisation's internal and external stakeholders which in turn form part of the broader society in which the organisation operates" (IoD, 2016). King IV emphasises "stakeholder inclusivity", making the organisation responsible for considering the needs, interests, and expectations of all the stakeholders, not just those with a financial stake in the company (IoD, 2016). This view of stakeholders is supported in South African legislation through the South African Companies Act (Act No. 71 of 2008), which provides the legal platform for the King Reports. In the CSR context of a developing country, stakeholders should not only include those with power, urgency and legitimacy in terms of impact on business sustainability, such as investors, consumers, employees, suppliers and government (Jamali, 2008:219), but also marginalised groups in communities (Bester & Groenewald, 2021; Delannon & Raufflet, 2021).

The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also specifies marginalised groups in communities that need to be empowered towards self-reliance, as beneficiaries of development initiatives (UN, 2019a). Empowerment is also highlighted in the UN's Voluntary Nation Review Reports (VNR), which aim to track progress on the SDG's, with the focus on the theme of "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality" (UN, 2019b). This emphasis on empowerment is viewed as fundamental in achieving sustainable development goals (Coy, Malekpour, Saeri & Dargaville, 2021). We support the view that empowerment is a continual process through which people actively participate in their transformation by utilising local knowledge and resources to become self-reliant, which is regarded as fundamental in achieving sustainable development goals (Mefalopulos & Grenna, 2004:26; Servaes, 1995:45-46).

For South African organisations, these guidelines suggest that their CSR could effectively pursue the sustainability of both business and society in an integrated manner so that value is created for both (cf. Porter & Kramer, 2006; 2011). To achieve this purpose, both business and societal sustainability should be reflected in the organisation's CSR strategy through the identification of stakeholders, thereby including those who should be informed about CSR in terms of business sustainability, as well as the marginalised groups to be empowered. This kind of CSR strategy should be supported by CSR communication (Elving, Golob, Podnar, Ellerup-Nielsen & Thomson, 2015; Heath & Waymer, 2017; Tao & Wilson, 2016) to contribute towards the dual sustainability as defined in this paper.

CSR communication

In 2008, Podnar defined CSR communication as "a process of anticipating stakeholders' expectations, articulation of CSR policy and managing of different organisation communication tools designed to provide true and transparent information about a company's or a brand's integration of its business operations, social and environmental concerns, and interactions with stakeholders". Other authors have expanded on this definition, describing CSR communication as a continual process of communication that focuses on CSR issues (Jimena, 2008:9), to benefit the company in terms of marketing, sales promotion, identity, and a positive reputation based on being seen as socially responsible (Newig, Schulz, Fischer, Hetze, Noran, Ludecke & Rieckman, 2013:2978; Zieita, 2017:37). These explanations reflect the gist of most of the current CSR communication literature, suggesting that CSR communication – guided by a corporate communication perspective – remains, for the most part, a tool for communicating *about* business sustainability to primary stakeholders (Jamali, 2008:219), usually through sustainability reports and social media posts (Kapoor, Balaji & Jiang, 2021; Kong & Witmaier, 2021; Saber & Weber, 2019) to achieve business outcomes (Verk et al., 2021:508). The business focus of CSR communication is echoed in the evaluation of CSR communication literature by Verk et al., (2021), who summarise the business case for CSR communication as follows: "CSR communication acts as a source of short-term or long-term operational value for companies … justifying its place within corporate communication". They present CSR communication, in effect, as a sub-section of corporate communication, whose main intention is to advance and create value for the business.

Corporate communication principles are strategically employed in the CSR context to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of organisations (Tae, 2017; Verk et al., 2021). The aim of CSR communication is, therefore, to manage business/society relations on behalf of the business to "strategically influence their societal context and thereby create a favourable environment for improving their performance" (Verk et al., 2021). This strategic approach uses different strategies to communicate about the business's CSR in ways that increase the credibility of the business in the eyes of the stakeholders (Verk et al., 2021) through the strategic transmission of information about CSR, directed towards business sustainability. Attempting to include societal sustainability within CSR communication, Hovring (2017a; 2017b) and other authors (see Lock, Seele & Heath, 2016; Golob, Verk, Ellerup-Nielsen, Thomsen, Elving & Podnar, 2017) conceptualised the role of communication in the creation of shared value, as theorised by Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011). Hovring (2017a) argued that shared value can be created through two-way symmetrical communication towards mutual understanding between organisations and stakeholders to respect and be sensitive towards the other's culture, values, and worldviews. When applied to CSR communication, it can be seen as ongoing active engagement between business and society's marginalised members about issues that affect both, to address these issues in ways that benefit both.

This view expands and redirects previous CSR communication strategies, which have focused more narrowly on the strategic transmission of information *about* CSR rather than on the kind of communication that takes place *within* the sphere of CSR activities themselves.

Although Porter and Kramer's work on creating shared value has been adopted widely in academic and business circles alike – as is evident from the inclusion thereof in the King IV report in South Africa (see IoD, 2016) – it has also attracted criticism, especially in developing world contexts. Some non-Western scholars criticised the approach as overly firm-centric, insufficiently taking local norms and values into consideration, not addressing unequal power dynamics between business and communities in developing contexts, and as an example of Western thinking being applied in non-Western contexts where it is not necessarily fitting (Jamali & Carroll, 2017; Munro, 2013; Voltan, Hervieus & Mills, 2017). We agree with some of the points of critique and argue that the current approach to shared value is not sufficient for motivating business to contribute tangibly to societal sustainability in terms of empowering marginalised groups in communities. Based on the "firm-centric" focus of shared value, we argue that business would most likely act primarily in its own interest in creating shared value and that this focus will be reflected in CSR communication. This implies that although CSR communication should strategically create value for both business and society, business sustainability will most likely be foremost pursued.

Therefore, we maintain that the current application of CSR communication will not contribute sufficiently to societal sustainability in terms of empowerment. To address this gap, we contend that the field of CSR communication could be expanded by including communication theories and principles that focus on sustainable development through the empowerment of marginalised groups in communities. Verk et al. (2021), support this argument by recommending a cross-fertilisation with literature on sustainability from the critical approach, "which is not yet fully established in CSR communication". Therefore, we argue that elements of development communication, that have their roots in the critical approach, could be incorporated into CSR communication.

Development communication is viewed by various global developmental agencies as communication that contributes to sustainable development through the empowerment of society (see UNDP, 2011; UNICEF, 2017; World Bank, 2008). In the theoretical field of development communication, the participatory approach is considered the norm when communication aims to facilitate empowerment. The participatory approach argues for the participation of beneficiaries in all aspects of developmental initiatives: from decision-making to evaluation through empowered participation and dialogical communication (Huesca, 2008:511-512; McAnany, 2012:87; Mefalopulos, 2008:91; Nair & White, 1993:54). The participatory approach takes the view that if the communication within development initiatives is participatory, dialogical, and culturally sensitive, it can more successfully contribute to empowerment towards sustainable development (Melkote, 1996:262-270; Servaes, 1995:46-47; Servaes & Malikhao, 2008:94-95).

In line with the main principles of the participatory approach to development communication, the UN uses the term "communication for development" and defines it as a "two-way communication system that enable[s] dialogue and that allow[s] communities to speak out, express their aspirations and concerns and participate in the decisions that relate to their development" (UNDP, 2011). The World Bank explains how communication can contribute to sustainability by arguing that "communication is applied to engage stakeholders, assess the situation, and devise effective strategies leading to better and more sustainable development initiatives. It is more than transmitting information; it is about using communication to generate new knowledge and consensus to facilitate change" (Mefalopulos, 2008). UNICEF's (2017) definition also reflects the thoughts of the participatory approach when referring to development communication as a two-way process "for sharing ideas and knowledge using a range of communication tools and approaches that empower individuals and communities to take actions to improve their lives". These definitions emphasise the need for communication with communities *within* development initiatives (such as CSR initiatives) and highlight the role of development communication in contributing to the empowerment and sustainable development of individuals and communities (societal sustainability).

These definitions can be applied to CSR communication, with a focus on sustainable development as an ongoing process of interaction between the organisation and intended CSR beneficiaries. This allows the beneficiaries to play an active part in the communication process, thereby addressing the issues that have an impact on their health and welfare.

Considering our goal to determine the extent to which business and societal sustainability are prioritised and how CSR communication is utilised to support both interests, as perceived by senior communication practitioners, we maintain that the scope of CSR communication should not be limited to merely sharing information about CSR initiatives. Instead, we suggest that by adopting development communication principles into the planning and execution of CSR initiatives, CSR communication can play a more dynamic role in empowering marginalised groups within communities and consequently contribute to sustainable development more effectively.

METHODS

Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior communication practitioners representing ten national and international organisations in South Africa. Senior communication practitioners were defined as individuals primarily responsible for formulating and executing CSR strategies and for the management and dissemination of CSR-related communication.

They were best placed to reflect on CSR practices, and especially CSR communication, in their respective organisations. Three participants were communication executives to whom the CSR portfolio reported directly. The other seven were communication managers: six were responsible for the combined portfolio of CSR and CSR communication, and one was responsible only for CSR communication. The ten practitioners were identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (see Du Plooy, 2009:114-115). Five participants were identified by means of the social network LinkedIn, based on their job descriptions. The other five were identified through snowball sampling, whereby communication consultants identified senior communication practitioners with whom they collaborated on CSR initiatives. The participants were chosen to represent diverse business industries: half of the organisations represented were multinational, with the senior communication practitioners responsible for CSR and CSR communication at an international level; the other half were South African businesses. The organisations were selected based on the extent of their CSR and CSR communication.

We conducted ten interviews. Eight interviews were conducted face-to-face and two were conducted telephonically to accommodate geographical distance. We continued conducting interviews until no new information or insights were obtained (data saturation). All interviews were conducted before the covid-19 pandemic (between 29 June and 20 September 2017). Prior to the interviews, we obtained informed consent from each participant through a consent form, which contained an explanation of the purpose of the study, the ethical clearance obtained for it, and a statement indicating that participation in this study was voluntary and that no individuals nor organisations would be identifiable when the study was made public. An interview schedule with 15 open-ended questions was developed to explore practitioners' perceptions of CSR and CSR communication.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using deductive qualitative content analysis. The analysis was directed by the themes of sustainability, CSR strategy, CSR stakeholders, and CSR communication.

Although the sample was small and the empirical study was completed in 2017, the data obtained through this study can serve as a valuable baseline study for identifying business trends in CSR and CSR communication. It can be used, for instance, to assess how changes in CSR frameworks and guidelines are reflected in current business trends.

In this way, scholars can analyse these trends in CSR business applications. Additionally, the data can be used to measure potential shifts in the mindset of business leaders, allowing changes in perceptions, opinions, and attitudes regarding CSR applications in businesses can be gauged over time.

FINDINGS

Sustainability

All the practitioners agreed that sustainability was the purpose of CSR. However, they held different perceptions of what sustainability meant.

Most participants linked CSR to the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit. Six participants focused mostly on business sustainability within this context by emphasising the long-term survival of the business. For example, one participant stated, "sustainability is actually about saying how do we make sure that our business practices are not only relevant for today but will remain good and relevant for future" (Participant 10). Another participant said, "it is about the long-term sustainability of our business and the environment in which we operate" (Participant 5). Although this could be interpreted as encompassing societal sustainability, given the interconnectedness of business and society, it was not specifically mentioned.

Four participants included a business and societal sustainability view by specifically referring to "people" and "communities", for example: "Sustainability is core for us as a business, our people and our planet" (Participant 9); and "towards a healthier future for business, communities and the planet" (Participant 7). Only one of these participants specifically mentioned societal sustainability (empowerment of society): "Education and skills development are important for the sustainability of society" (Participant

4).

When asked specifically about their views on empowerment, three participants perceived empowerment as the creation of shared value. Participant 5 explained: "Creating shared value with a shared vision – that is an empowered state". We argue that such perceptions emphasise the business sustainability focus rooted in shared value (see Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011), although we acknowledge that shared value could potentially also contribute to the empowerment of society.

Another four participants perceived empowerment primarily in terms of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE): "It is about empowering communities and taking into account what the B-BBEE codes require" (Participant 7). Participant 6 supported this argument by confirming that "for us, empowerment is also about how we involve small black business vendors in our supply chain". These responses reflect South Africa's focus on social transformation through B-BBEE to rectify social and economic inequality. In line with this, two participants perceived empowerment as "an ongoing process towards change" (Participant 8); and "it is about empowering communities to take ownership" (Participant 5). These views are in line with empowerment towards sustainable development since they recognise the need for social change and for communities to have power over their circumstances.

From these different perceptions of empowerment, we concluded that all participants agreed on the importance of empowerment of society through CSR, although they did not initially identify it as such.

CSR strategy

All the participants agreed that sustainability should be addressed strategically through CSR. Two different CSR strategies were followed by the participants.

Four participant's CSR strategies centred on community work, based on their business strategy, for example: "Our business strategy feeds our CSR strategy, so we only get involved in projects that align with our business strategy" (Participant 3), "making a difference in the community you serve" (Participant 1). These participants connected CSR with investing in communities, for example, through skills development programmes that led to subsequent employment of trained individuals within their organisation, resulting in a return on investment from their CSR projects. Through such projects that focus on skills development, society can be empowered towards societal sustainability. Such projects also contribute to business sustainability through the alignment with the business strategy.

The other participants' CSR strategy followed an integrated approach within the business strategy where sustainability within the triple context was an outcome of all the business processes. Participants defined it as: "Not ad-hoc and not an add-on but an integral part of all your business processes that starts at strategy, addresses issues, deals with your social impact, and creates a sustainable environment that would lead to transformation and empowerment" (Participant 5); and it "encompasses sustainability development and is ingrained in the way we conduct ourselves" (Participant 8). These companies could thus contribute to the empowerment of society through all their business processes and not just through CSR projects.

Some participants' CSR strategies are integral to their business processes, and they accelerate change and transformation in both business and society towards dual sustainability. Other participants' CSR strategies are based on community projects that support the business strategy and could lead to the empowerment of society.

CSR stakeholders

It was important to understand how organisations identified their stakeholders in terms of CSR, as it reflects their views about whom they have a responsibility towards. The practitioners identified CSR stakeholders based on the core business of the organisation and its geographical location. For example, Participant 9 explained that "we do identification based on people relevant to our core business", while Participant 7 spoke of those within the organisation's "geographical footprint".

Community

All participants viewed the community as a critical stakeholder group in CSR. They believed that organisations should accept responsibility for the community in their geographic vicinity, and that this responsibility extended to employees who live in those communities. As Participant 1 noted, "we want to make an impact on the community we serve". All agreed that the organisation should accept responsibility towards the community in its geographical vicinity. All the participants specified employees as important stakeholders who form part of the community to benefit from CSR. They argued that employees live in the communities and thus formed part of the organisation's area of CSR responsibility, for example: "Go into the communities where your staff live ... the issues that affect them should affect business too" (Participant 7). This view was supported by Participant 5: "Our role is to provide continuity and consistency for our employees and the communities where we operate."

For our participants, employees were the focus of their selection of communities, and issues that affected these stakeholders would then be addressed by these organisations' CSR. Employees can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the local communities which they are part of. Addressing issues that are important to them – not as employees per se, but as representatives of local communities – can lead to relevant empowerment initiatives, consistent with societal sustainability. However, we argue that marginalised groups that do not include employees should also be identified as stakeholders although their inclusion has no direct benefit for the business. Focusing on the empowerment of marginalised groups (as proposed by the UN), can lead to a more sustainable society, which can also work in favour of the business.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) and individuals in communities

All the practitioners highlighted the importance of networks and partnerships within the communities to assist with sustainable development. It is important to distinguish these stakeholders as allies who can *assist* with CSR, from the stakeholders mentioned above who should *benefit* from CSR initiatives. The practitioners specified key individuals within the communities and particularly NGOs (including foundations, trusts and community organisations), with whom they believed it was important to partner to achieve their CSR objectives, as explained by Participant 8: "We rely on NGOs and foundations to identify needs and we help them to address those needs because communities don't always want to work with us directly". Other organisations partnered with NGOs "because they have access to the community and understand the issues and the culture of the community" (Participant 2). Through such partnerships, businesses could contribute to the empowerment of society by addressing issues that are relevant to society in a culturally sensitive manner whilst enabling businesses to reach their CSR objectives.

Influential individuals within communities were also viewed as important for "enabling" stakeholders, such as community leaders, political leaders, or opinion leaders directly involved in their communities. These were described by Participant 5 as "people with influence, key enablers, those are the people that you need to build relationships with, for example, the chief of the village". Their importance was based on the influence they could exert on potential CSR initiatives and thus helping or hindering businesses to reach their CSR objectives.

The NGOs and individuals in communities were thus identified as enablers of CSR initiatives. Even though these enablers were identified as important in assisting businesses to reach their CSR objectives, they also have the potential to assist businesses in contributing to the empowerment of society.

Government

Another stakeholder that the practitioners identified was government, with whom they believed their companies should partner on CSR initiatives. For Participant 9, government connections contributed to credibility: "Do not try to do it all on your own. If you partner with the government, it gives whatever you do legitimacy". Participant 8 further saw the advantage of partnering with the government as adding an "enabling factor" for CSR initiatives. Participants also acknowledged the legislative role of government, especially citing the B-BBEE codes and the Companies Act (No. 71 of 2008), as well as the guidance provided by national and international bodies, such as the King reports and the UN's Sustainable

Development Goals, as relevant for directing their CSR initiatives.

The participants' perceptions of partnering with the government as a stakeholder indicate that businesses in South Africa recognise their significant role in the sphere of sustainable development to assist the government in addressing the country's pressing social concerns. Thus, their partnership with the government helps them to advance societal sustainability, even though the identification of the government as a stakeholder is also motivated by the advantage for businesses to partner with the government beyond the basic necessity of complying with relevant legislation.

Overall, our participants identified most CSR stakeholders in terms of contributions they can make to enable the business in its CSR initiatives towards achieving business sustainability.

CSR communication

Although the participants agreed on sustainability as the purpose of CSR and they incorporate both business and societal sustainability in their CSR strategy, CSR communication was mostly perceived to support business sustainability.

All the practitioners viewed CSR communication as providing information *about* CSR initiatives to stakeholders such as employees, customers and the communities, as Participant 7 explained: "The communities that are benefitting need to be reminded of what we do". This communication takes place through various channels and on different platforms. Sustainability reporting and social media posts were singled out as the most prominent ways to communicate about CSR. The participants also elaborated on using storytelling internally to motivate and inspire their employees and externally to create awareness of their impact on communities: "... let them who benefitted from the initiative tell their story ... this is how we communicate the impact that we have in communities" (Participant 10).

Several practitioners elaborated on the role of employees in CSR communication. They explained that communicating CSR-related information to employees makes them feel proud of the organisation for which they work, leading them spreading the message in the community. In this regard, Participant 6 explained: "We always start with our staff. People who work for us need to believe and feel that we are different from other companies and worth working for". Participant 2 added support for this argument: "Your staff are your biggest brand builders and should know about your CSR activities". These practitioners saw employees as 'brand agents' who could contribute to the business's sustainability by communicating about CSR projects to them so that they can spread the word.

Their explanations reflected two different views on the function of CSR communication. Firstly, the majority perceived CSR communication as a strategic process of managing stakeholder relationships towards reputation building. This process was explained as "the communication function showing its value by not only being busy but being busy with a purpose, thus impacting on business" (Participant 6). This purpose was explained as building and managing relationships with stakeholders, "because it is about relationships between people and that's what communication does" (Participant 3). The role of CSR communication in building these relationships was perceived as one that manages the organisation's reputation for it to "be seen as a legitimate good corporate citizen" (Participant 5) and contribute to business sustainability.

The second view perceived CSR communication from a marketing communication perspective: "The responsibility lies with corporate communications and corporate communications falls within corporate marketing. Personally, I think it should sit in marketing because it is a marketing activity" (Participant 2). Participant 9 supported this marketing-related argument by stating: "I am acutely aware of the millennials choosing one provider over another based on the work you do in society". From this perspective, CSR is viewed as a marketing tool that is part of a marketing strategy, where CSR communication is used for marketing purposes such as increased sales or customer loyalty, thus directed towards advancing the business.

The findings showed that all practitioners initially viewed CSR communication only as a tool for enhancing business sustainability, by communicating about CSR to manage relationships or as a marketing activity. The practitioners' comments rarely mentioned CSR communication being used

towards empowering communities – by, for example, using it to mobilise communities to participate in CSR initiatives through employing local knowledge and resources to become self-reliant. Instead, they focused on how CSR communication could benefit the business directly.

After exploring their initial perceptions of CSR communication, we asked specific questions on communication that takes place *within* CSR initiatives. The participants indicated that there is communication taking place *within* CSR initiatives, although they did not originally view it as CSR communication. In terms of communication within CSR, cultural diversity was viewed as extremely important and having a big impact on CSR projects; "accept the culture and find a way to work with it not against it" (Participant 2). Therefore, understanding the culture of the community was viewed as "critical in every communication context" (Participant 4). Participants thus viewed culture as something to be understood and accepted. However, it was not perceived as something to be utilised within the CSR initiative towards the empowerment of society as theorised in the participatory approach to development communication.

The responses of the practitioners further showed that there are some forms of dialogue and participation taking place, as Participant 4 explained, "You can't just tell them what to do because then you won't get their buy-in or support and your project will not succeed ... you need full participation towards a mutual goal". The utilisation of words such as "get their buy-in and support", however, indicates that dialogue and participation are utilised from a corporate communication perspective where the organisation has predetermined objectives and utilises participation and dialogue to get stakeholders to agree to those objectives.

Participation and dialogue are not primarily used towards societal empowerment where stakeholders are equal interlocutors and participate in decision-making as stated in the participatory approach to development communication. However, some practitioners did acknowledge that their "dialogical process could be better utilised" (Participant 3) and changes should be made "towards a more dialogue-based approach by constant asking and listening" (Participant 7). This indicates that business is moving towards a more open dialogical process as promoted by the participatory approach to development communication.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CSR is guided by various formal standards and guidelines that direct businesses to address the sustainability of both business and society (dual sustainability) within the CSR strategy as an integrated part of the business strategy. In line with these standards and guidelines, all the practitioners stated that they pursue sustainability as the overall purpose of CSR within the triple context.

We argue that CSR strategy should contribute to dual sustainability by creating a strategic advantage for the business by supporting the corporate reputation and legitimacy of the business; further, it should also contribute to societal sustainability through the empowerment of society. The participants followed two different CSR strategies in pursuit of dual sustainability, namely community projects and an integrated approach. Within community projects, participants argued that business sustainability is achieved by investing in projects that reflect the business strategy. Societal sustainability (as defined in this study) was not explicitly mentioned within this strategy.

These companies thus did not follow an integrated approach as stipulated within the formal standard where the CSR strategy is incorporated into the overall business strategy. However, in their view, they still contribute to sustainability within the triple context through their CSR projects. Companies that follow an integrated approach support dual sustainability through the creation of shared value within the triple context. This implies that CSR is incorporated within their overall business strategy as the outcome of all their business processes. We argue that such a strategy may have a greater impact on dual sustainability because it is pursued throughout all business processes and not just within CSR projects.

For the CSR strategy to support dual sustainability, stakeholders should not only include those who can contribute to the sustainability of business, but should include marginalised groups in society who need to be empowered towards societal sustainability. All the participants identified communities

(specifically employees) as the main beneficiaries of CSR, and government, NGOs and individuals in communities as enabling partners who can assist businesses in reaching their CSR objectives. However, we argue that although such contributions could support societal sustainably, marginalised groups that need empowerment towards sustainable development should be singled out as CSR stakeholders.

The perceptions of stakeholders shed light on how the participants viewed their contribution to dual sustainability. We conclude that the participating organisations prioritise business sustainability while only supporting societal sustainability. Further, we suggest that they can make a more significant contribution to societal sustainability than they are currently making, if they utilise development communication principles within their CSR towards the empowerment of communities.

In the participants' original response to CSR communication, perceptions centred on creating awareness about CSR towards reputation-building. Only after specifically being asked about communication with beneficiaries of CSR initiatives, the practitioners indicated that communication is being utilised *within* CSR initiatives. However, the communication within CSR was not clearly directed towards the empowerment of society. We maintain that both organisations whose CSR strategy is based on community projects, and those that follow a more integrated approach, could contribute more to societal sustainability if the communication with beneficiaries within their initiatives is guided by the principles of the participatory approach. We argue that such communication would contribute to business sustainability as well, because enhanced contributions to the empowerment of society should provide organisations with more tangible results to communicate about, which can be utilised in terms of relationship-building and marketing.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Only ten organisations took part in this study, therefore the results cannot be generalised to all organisations in South Africa. However, the study's aim was not to generalise the results, but rather to serve as an explorative study to understand the specific context and identify broad trends in CSR and CSR communication to be used as a baseline study for further research.

Further research could include more organisations from different business sectors in South Africa and within other developing countries for a more representative view. A comparative study could be undertaken on the differences in views and perceptions between developing and developed countries.

CONCLUSION

We maintain that the focus on business sustainability in CSR communication stems from, amongst others, the current CSR communication literature, which is primarily based on the theoretical field of corporate communication, where the communication function is largely utilised to advance corporate reputation. Current CSR communication efforts, therefore, do not always address ways in which communication could also be used to communicate with the beneficiaries of CSR initiatives within CSR, to contribute to their empowerment. The perceptions of the practitioners also indicated that they do not view communication that takes place within initiatives necessarily as CSR communication. This may result in communication *about* CSR and communication *within* CSR being viewed in silos, which can result in an either-or approach that would not support dual sustainability in an integrated manner. Such a view further contributes to CSR being prioritised to contribute to business sustainability while only supporting societal sustainability. We argue that businesses could do more than just support societal sustainability if they follow a more integrated approach to CSR communication. Such an approach should integrate principles of both corporate and development communication that could guide communication practitioners, especially in developing countries, to utilise CSR communication in a mutually inclusive manner to contribute to business and societal sustainability alike.

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