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# Critical analysis of corporate social responsibility projects developed by Brazilian companies: Providing new insights for debates

Letícia Matsutani<sup>a</sup>, Izabela Simon Rampasso<sup>b,\*</sup>, Milena Pavan Serafim<sup>c</sup>, Osvaldo L.G. Quelhas<sup>d</sup>, Walter Leal Filho<sup>e</sup>, Rosley Anholon<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Mechanical Engineering, University of Campinas, Campinas, Brazil

<sup>b</sup> Departamento de Ingeniería Industrial, Universidad Católica Del Norte, Antofagasta, Chile

<sup>c</sup> Laboratory of Public Sector Studies, School of Applied Sciences, University of Campinas, Limeira, Brazil

<sup>d</sup> Master Program in Management Systems and Doctoral Program in Sustainable Management Systems, Federal Fluminense University, Niterói, Brazil

<sup>e</sup> Faculty of Life Sciences, Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Hamburg, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to carry out a critical analysis on Corporate Social Responsibility projects developed by Brazilian companies considering the perceptions of experienced professionals. Brazil is an emerging economy and this study can contribute to improving projects of Corporate Social Responsibility developed by companies in emerging countries. Using this information, a SWOT matrix was structured. The research strategies used were bibliographic research (to establish the theoretical foundation) and semi-structured interviews with 18 experienced professionals on Corporate Social Responsibility projects. Data analysis was performed using a content analysis approach and the findings were used to structure the SWOT matrix. Despite some “Strengths” practices mentioned by professionals, many “Weaknesses” were highlighted regarding Corporate Social Responsibility projects developed by Brazilian companies and they may be improved to obtain better results. Interesting “Opportunities” were mentioned, for example, new business possibilities when companies are recognized as socially responsible. Return of branding and marketing due to sustainable positioning of companies are other possible opportunities to be explored. Finally, related to “Threats”, professionals mentioned aspects that may lead to devaluation of Corporate Social Responsibility practices in the Brazilian context, such as prejudices and political polarization. Despite the exploratory nature of the study, the information presented here can greatly contribute to the expansion of debates on Corporate Social Responsibility practices developed by Brazilian companies. It may be used to address public policies and motivate future studies aligned with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Researchers can use the findings presented here as a starting point to develop studies on Corporate Social Responsibility issues.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was evolving over the years and it gained importance in business management and academic research. This concept is associated with the commitment an organization should have towards society, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects to search for a better future for all (Borges et al., 2018). It is directly linked to the concept of Triple Bottom Line (TBL) idealized by Elkington (1998). Cazeri (2017) corroborates with statements presented and argue that when companies develop their activities in line with the TBL concept, they improve the community

quality of life and bring benefits for all stakeholders. They also work for the preservation of the productive capacity of future generations and balance among the aforementioned spheres (Cazeri, 2017). Muruviwa et al. (2020) highlight the role played by the different stakeholders regarding CSR, emphasizing that companies actions are not the only ones responsible for CSR consequences. An example of it is mentioned by Osei-Kojo and Andrews (2020), in which the contributions of local community engagement is emphasized.

Carvalho et al., 2010 argue that consumers respond positively regarding purchasing intention and enterprise image when they realize actions socially responsible carried out by companies. In Hanaysha

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [izarampasso@gmail.com](mailto:izarampasso@gmail.com), [izabela.rampasso@ucn.cl](mailto:izabela.rampasso@ucn.cl) (I.S. Rampasso).

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(2018), the authors verified a positive relation between CSR and customer retention and the value attributed by customers to the company. Recent studies of [Stanco and Lerro \(2020\)](#), [Chen and Huang \(2018\)](#) and [Wang \(2020\)](#) corroborate these arguments.

An important milestone that has been contributing to the greater adoption of CSR practices was the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals establishment in 2015 ([UN, 2015a](#)). Three of them may be characterized as important drivers for companies in the search for a better future. SDG 8 is associated with sustainable economic growth, full employment and decent work ([UN, 2015b](#)); SDG 9 is related to innovation and inclusive and sustainable infrastructure ([UN, 2015c](#)) and, finally, SDG 12 is associated with responsible consumption and production ([UN, 2015d](#)). [ElAlfy et al. \(2020\)](#) highlight that the aforementioned SDGs are widely used by academics in scientific research. In addition, [Rampasso et al. \(2018\)](#), [Corrêa et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Simon Rampasso et al. \(2021\)](#) highlight the need to prepare the future professionals considering sustainable development related issues. This argument is more evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Anholon et al., 2020](#)). These SDGs will be more detailed in the next section.

Regarding Latin American companies, it is possible to observe that there are still few organizations developing CSR practices in a structured manner. In general, despite some benefits observed due to initiatives, many opportunities for improvement are noted regarding CSR practices adoption ([Borges et al., 2018](#)). For [González-Rodríguez et al. \(2019\)](#), many of the challenges observed in the adoption and improvement of CSR practices in Latin America are associated with cultural issues and political-economic scenarios. [Munro et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that multinational companies need to understand the context of the countries they are placed in to develop successful CSR projects.

Global economic crises, economic instability and corporate moral legitimacy present challenges to CSR practices in Latin America. The combination of private interests and public virtues is evident because of the fragility of the region's socio-economic and political scenario. The persistence of low economic growth, accompanied by the increasing financialization of the economy, the passive and subordinate insertion of countries in the context of globalized economies, the low capacity for planning and action by the State, the flexibilization of labour laws and the precariousness of work are some of the factors that shape this scenario.

The institutionalization of corporate social responsibility is part of the globalized world agenda (as the change from national to global governance) and falls within the discussion between hard law and soft law and the growing movement of social and territorial connection on the part of companies ([Scherer and Palazzo, 2011](#)). Regardless of the patterns of interaction between the State and the Market, this agenda seeks to disseminate a new image of the business community, which aspires to be perceived as more conscious, politicized, involved with efforts to overcome social problems, and concerned with the quality of products, with the transparency of information on the components, formulas and their possible impacts, in addition to more zeal as to labour and environmental relations ([Garcia, 2004](#)).

The unconditional support to the interests of the national business community (a growing phenomenon until the 1990s when the opening of the trade balance occurred) ([Diniz and Boschi, 2003](#)) meant that there was no space for the real implementation of a development pattern based on an institutional model that would be able to fairly generate positive outcomes to society, such as equitable income distribution, virtuous consumption cycles and, consequently, economic growth ([Draibe and Riesco, 2007](#)).

Because of this scenario, which is partly caused by a perverse historical confluence between private interests and the Brazilian State, it is contradictory to think about CSR as part of broad private interests, since local companies often place themselves in a strong commitment to the relaxation of labour laws and environmental legislation ([Garcia, 2004](#)) and, in general, business and financial deregulation ([Joutsenvirta and Vaara, 2015](#)).

The debate is complex and this article has no intention of exhausting it; on the contrary, the idea is just to point out some challenges under which the Brazilian CSR theme is inserted. Although some authors, such as [Garcia \(2004\)](#), understand that CSR practices in Brazil are aligned more with companies' marketing strategies than to an actual commitment to social change, there are very interesting CSR initiatives taking place in the country, such as the aircraft manufacturer Embraer, as presented in the study by [Anholon et al. \(2016\)](#).

Regarding Brazilian companies context, [Cazeri, \(2017\)](#) carried out an interesting study using a framework idealized by [Asif et al. \(2013\)](#) and the perception of experts concerning the adoption of CSR practices by Brazilian companies. They noted that, in general, companies in Brazil superficially develop their activities and are not integrated with other organizational strategies and management systems. In this sense, a research gap is evidenced to understand the following research question: How do specialists consider the current strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats in companies in Brazil regarding CSR practices?

Given the context presented above and aiming to contribute to the expansion of the debates on CSR practices, this study aims to structure a SWOT matrix of CSR projects developed by Brazilian companies, considering perceptions of 18 experienced professionals on the subject (considering a broad context of companies in Brazil, without specifying any sector of companies or kind of projects). This study is characterized as a complement to [Cazeri, \(2017\)](#)'s study since it uses a differentiated strategy for data collection (semi-structured interviews) and a different approach to data analysis. In addition, this study uses the SWOT matrix to present the results and consider a scenario three years later. Despite the exploratory nature of the study, the insights of this study can greatly contribute to the expansion of debates on Corporate Social Responsibility practices developed by Brazilian companies.

In addition to this introduction, the paper presents four more sections. Section 2 is devoted to theoretical foundations. Section 3 details the methodological procedures. Section 4 shows the results and associated debates and, finally, section 5 presents the conclusions and final considerations. The bibliographic references are listed in the sequence.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

The CSR concept was introduced by Howard R. Bowen in the 1950s and, over the years, there was a considerable change in its understanding ([Ashrafi et al., 2018](#)). According to [Sarkar and Searcy \(2016\)](#), academic literature presents different definitions about CSR, however, since 2003 increase the importance of ethical aspects and stakeholder management. Environmental and social aspects have gained more attention in management decisions over the years ([Sarkar and Searcy, 2016](#)).

The change of companies' behaviour may be understood as a consequence of globalization and societal pressures. Consumers, increasingly, are concerned not only with product or service, aspects regarding actions developed by companies to provide a better future and quality for society are also analysed in purchase moments. This pressure for new public policies and regimentations ([Kanji and Chopra, 2010](#)). [Villa Castaño et al. \(2018\)](#) corroborate with statements present and glimpse socially responsible consumption as the only way to a better future.

The launch of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 by the United Nations increased debates about the real role of the companies for society. SDGs 8, 9 and 12, in particular, are directly associated with the organization's environment and may contribute to companies achieving more balanced management. SDG 8, entitled "decent employment and economic growth" aims to promote economic growth, the creation of new companies and jobs, while preventing child, slave and unworthy labour. SDG 9, entitled "industry, innovation and infrastructure", aims at sustainable industrialization based on the expansion of infrastructure and innovation, impacting directly jobs creation, a better quality of life and knowledge dissemination. Finally,

SDG12, entitled “responsible consumption and production”, seeks to promote better use of resources and energy efficiency, providing access to services that improve people’s quality of life (UN, 2015a). Based on the description made above, it is noted that the implementation of these objectives contributes to developing companies according to TBL guidelines.

Currently, there are many models to adopt CSR practices on business, highlighting the model disseminated by ISO 26000. This model guides all organizations, regardless of type, size and level of development and does not have a purpose of certification (ISO, 2010).

ISO 26000 standard initially presents the terms, definitions and principles that organizations need to understand to correctly adopt CSR practices. In the sequence, it discusses social responsibility recognition, identification and engagement of stakeholders, central themes associated with CSR and integration of these practices into company strategies. It also presents examples of tools that may be used in applications (ISO, 2010). Chakroun et al. (2019) argue that the adoption of ISO 26000 guidelines provides better corporate governance, better working conditions, preservation of the environment and better consumer perception regarding companies, indirectly generating positive financial performance. For Andrea and Rodri (2014) corporate social responsibility influence positively brand image and consumer loyalty. Aracil (2019) argue that companies that develop CSR practices related to their core activity have more possibility to achieve better results when compared with activities that develop them in a disassociated form.

Another important standard to be highlighted in the CSR context is the guidelines of the Global Report Initiative (GRI, 2018), associated with the preparation and publication of sustainability reports. GRI main objective is to create a homogeneous structure that can be used by companies worldwide to disseminate their sustainable practices. The standards are not compulsory (GRI, 2018), but if their guidelines are properly used, they can increase organizations competitiveness (Martins et al., 2019). The GRI structure is composed of universal standards (GRI 101 - Foundation, GRI 102 – General disclosures, and GRI 103 – Management approach), and specific standards (GRI 200 – Economic, GRI 300 – Environmental and GRI 400 – Social) (GRI, 2018). In a study involving 35 Spanish companies, Pérez and Lopez-Gutierrez (2017) point out that CSR reports are directly related to the companies’ reputation. The quality of data available for these companies is recognized by society.

If properly integrated with other business management systems, CSR practices may provide interesting benefits, such as the development of employees and their skills, creation of social responsibility culture in the company, the establishment of a satisfactory, safety and healthy place to work, among others (Asif et al., 2013). Asif et al. (2013) still present an interesting model regarding how companies may conduct this integration. In addition, Munro et al. (2018) highlight the importance of volunteer programs and company employees’ engagement to have success in Corporate Social Responsibility practices implementation.

Focusing the reality of emerging countries, the studies of Li et al. (2010) and Mugova et al. (2017) can be emphasized. Despite the distance between this two research, both highlight barriers that these countries present for more CSR practices and better results. As indicated in the review performed by Dartey-Baah and Amoako (2021), in the emerging countries, CSR related practices are many times wrongly considered only as philanthropy actions, which difficulties an adequate alignment between these practices and the organizations’ objectives.

In the Brazilian context, it is noted that CSR gained more attention especially after the creation of the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis in 1981. The main objective of this institute was to bring companies closer to social actions. However, it was only in 1993 that the largest Brazilian private movement through the campaign entitled “Citizenship action against hunger, misery and for life”. Another important point in the history of CSR in Brazil corresponds to the creation of the Ethos Institute in 1998. This institute grouped companies interested in incorporating sustainable practices in their businesses

activities (Lázaro et al., 2016). Finally, in this brief historical report, we highlight the creation of the first Corporate Sustainability Indicator in Latin America by São Paulo Stock Exchange in 2005, aiming to encourage the sustainable development of companies (BM&FBovespa, 2019).

Some studies carried out on CSR in Brazilian companies’ context evidence improve opportunities plausible, beyond the benefits achieved until now. Caiado et al. (2018) argue that many companies in Brazil still develop sustainable practices without alignment with the strategies, stakeholder engagement and continuous improvement. In addition, Cazeri et al. (2018) argue that in general these activities are developed superficially and may compromise better results. Another interesting study to be highlighted is the research carried out by Borges et al. (2018), who analysed sustainability reports published by 30 Brazilian companies and note, in general form, many improvement opportunities.

The academic literature also presents studies that provide comparisons between CSR practices developed by Brazilian companies and companies from other countries. Cavalcanti et al. (2012), Barlow (2013) and Lázaro et al. (2016), for example, investigated the development of CSR practices in China, the United Kingdom and Mexico companies, respectively, establishing comparisons with the practices developed by Brazilian companies. In a general way, these studies confirm that historical and cultural aspects strongly influence CSR practices adoption.

### 3. Methodological procedures

This section aims to describe the methodological procedures used, to allow other researchers to understand the research details. The development of this research was carried out through five well-defined stages presented in Fig. 1 and detailed in the sequence.

In stage 1, bibliographic research on Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was carried out to establish the theoretical foundation (for introduction and theoretical background sections). This step allowed authors to understand better the reality of CSR, especially in America Latina and Brazil contexts.

The search for scientific articles uses the following terms: “corporate social responsibility”, “triple bottom line”, “sustainability”, “sustainable development goals”, “ISO 26000”, “Brazil”, “sustainability reports”, “Stakeholder”, “consumer”, “emerging economy”, “corporate governance”, “multinational companies”. The scientific bases consulted were Emerald, ScienceDirect, Scopus and Periódicos Capes (a Brazilian scientific base). A great number of papers were identified and those most relevant were selected for analysis. The analysis criteria for selecting the papers used to structure the first sections of this manuscript considered important aspects defined by the authors of this study to understand the theme: an example of a company that is a benchmark of CSR in Brazil, articles regarding CSR integration frameworks, studies comparing Brazilian reality with other realities (for both developed and developing countries), and other studies supporting the article.

An additional search on the theme “SWOT Analysis” was performed on the same scientific basis mentioned, aiming to better understand it before structuring the research protocol. It is important to mention that the choice of SWOT matrix as a structure to present the results was largely debated by the authors of this article during research planning. The SWOT analysis, a tool used to assist decision making at a strategic level, became popular due to its clarity and simplicity. The SWOT assembly matrix begins with internal analysis, seeking to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the subject in question. Subsequently, the opportunities and threats evidenced from the analysis of political, economic, social and technological issues are presented (Dyson, 2004). Several studies in the literature (Agyekum et al., 2020; Gayatri and Vaishampayan, 2012; Hai, 2011; Reißmann et al., 2018; Rocha and Caldeira-Pires, 2019; Webley, 2001) use SWOT as a framework in the research.

Established the theoretical foundation, it was possible to structure the protocol to be used in semi-structured interviews (step 2). In this





Fig. 1. Stages of research (Source: Authors).

kind of interview, it is presented a macro category for the interviewees and they can freely argue about the category (Moré, 2015). In addition to 4 questions directly related to the SWOT analysis of CSR projects developed by Brazilian companies, a question was added to understand the experts' perception regarding the use of global guidelines in the management of CSR projects. Table 1 presents the research protocol used in the semi-structured interviews, i.e., these five questions were presented for the respondents and, when answering each question, the interviewee was free to explain their perception and argue about it. Each interview lasted around 30 min and were conducted via Google Meet, Skype and telephone, according to respondents availability. It is important to note that in Brazil studies involving human's participant demand appreciation by the ethics committee. All research projects related to this study, as well as the protocol used in the semi-structured interviews and the terms explaining the research procedures for the respondents, were approved by the Ethics Committee of the university under certificate number 18829419.1.0000.5405. No data was collected before this approval.

Through these references, the authors adapted the questions presented in Table 1.

Finalized stage 2, the data collection via semi-structured interviews began (step 3). The participants were selected in a non-probabilistic manner by judgment. Experienced professionals on CSR projects were invited to participate, including businessmen, consultants and

Table 1

Protocol used in semi-structured interviews (Source: each reference presented in the table presents a context synthesized through the explanations below the Table).

#	Question	References
1.	In your opinion, do Brazilian companies use modern guidelines to manage the CSR projects?	Adapted from (Anholon et al., 2016 <sup>a</sup> ; Caiado et al., 2018 <sup>b</sup> ; Cazeri et al., 2018 <sup>c</sup> ; González-Rodríguez et al., 2019 <sup>d</sup> )
2.	In your opinion what are the strengths of CSR projects performed by Brazilian companies?	Adapted from (Dyson, 2004 <sup>e</sup> ; Helms and Nixon, 2010 <sup>f</sup> )
3.	In your opinion what are the weaknesses of CSR projects performed by Brazilian companies?	Adapted from (Dyson, 2004 <sup>e</sup> ; Helms and Nixon, 2010 <sup>f</sup> )
4.	In your opinion what are the opportunities for CSR projects performed by Brazilian companies?	Adapted from (Dyson, 2004 <sup>e</sup> ; Helms and Nixon, 2010 <sup>f</sup> )
5.	In your opinion what are the threats of CSR projects performed by Brazilian companies?	Adapted from (Dyson, 2004 <sup>e</sup> ; Helms and Nixon, 2010 <sup>f</sup> )

<sup>a</sup> Anholon et al. (2016) describe an example of a Brazilian manufacturer of airplanes considered a World Class Company in the development of CSR practices.

<sup>b</sup> Caiado et al. (2018) analyze the sustainability performance of Brazilian organizations.

<sup>c</sup> Cazeri et al. (2018) analyze the integration between CSR practices and management systems in Brazilian companies.

<sup>d</sup> González-Rodríguez et al. (2019) analyze and compare the realities of Brazil and Spain regarding CSR practices.

<sup>e</sup> Dyson (2004) and.

<sup>f</sup> Helms and Nixon (2010) used SWOT analysis in their studies; and these studies were used as basis for the questions.

academics. The final sample of the study was composed of 18 professionals (9 men and 9 women) who agree to participate. The selected respondents were carefully chosen to ensure that they present expertise on the subject through academic qualifications or CSR implementation projects. Regarding academic qualifications, we considered CSR-related degrees, advisory experience, publications, and research projects. The details of each respondent are presented in Table 2. The interviews carried out over 4 months. We highlight that the researchers were interacting with the interviewees and they could solve doubts when necessary. In addition, the respondents are experts and are used to the terms used in the questions presented.

The data collected in the interviews were analysed via the content analysis approach (step 4) using guidelines disseminated by Elo e Kyngäs (2008). This analysis is composed of three phases: a) preparation; b) organization; c) elaboration.

According to the aforementioned authors, in the preparation phase, the analysis unit must be defined (the analysis unit may be a word or a theme) and researchers need to familiarize themselves with the data. In this study, in particular, the analysis unit was defined as a phrase ("Corporate Social Responsibility projects developed by Brazilian companies") and the reading of interviews notes allowed familiarization with data collected.

After the preparation stage, the organization stage started. In this stage, Elo and Kyngäs (2008) present two forms to conduct the analysis: inductive or deductive. The inductive form is recommended when there is no prior knowledge about the subject or when it is not complete. The deductive form is indicated to evaluate data using models or theories. Since the authors of this study chose to use the SWOT matrix framework as the structure for analysis, we understood that the deductive form is more appropriate.

Finally, in the elaboration phase, analyzes were presented, followed by debates concerning literature statements (step 5). The establishment of conclusions and final considerations were done in section 5.

#### 4. Results and discussions

As mentioned in the previous section, before answering questions related to the SWOT matrix, respondents were asked about the use of modern guidelines by Brazilian companies to manage their CSR projects. Regarding these modern guidelines, for 66.67% of interviewed professionals, in general, Brazilian companies use some guidelines of ISO 26000, Sustainable Development Objective and Global Reporting Initiative. However, the respondents highlighted some important aspects. In general, large companies with a global presence manage their CSR projects considering more requirements of guidelines mentioned and with compliance while small and medium companies have more difficulty/resistance to adopt the practices.

Another aspect mentioned by interviewees in this question was related to the purpose of CSR practices adoption. For 44.45% of the interviewees, there are still companies in Brazil that only adopt CSR practices to promote advertising campaigns. When this occurs, the CSR actions developed have a very low impact. The statements presented above, in general line, are in accordance with some information present by Cazeri et al. (2018).

Regarding "strengths" points associated with CSR projects developed by Brazilian companies, aspects related to management, employees and

**Table 2**  
Respondents details.

Code	Bachelor degree	Highest degree	Professional experience time	Experience on the subject
R1	Economist	Master	34 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R2	Administration	Master	18 years	Author of research on the subject
R3	Public Relations and Journalism	Specialization	27 years	Management of CSR consultancy projects and author of book on the subject
R4	Administration	Master	16 years	Management of CSR projects
R5	Administration and Aeronautical Science	PhD	17 years	Author of research on the subject
R6	Social Communication - Public Relations	Master	18 years	Author of research on the subject
R7	Materials Production Engineering	PhD	32 years	Author of research on the subject
R8	Oceanography	PhD	36 years	Author of research on the subject
R9	Chemical Engineering	PhD	31 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R10	Social Communication	Master	26 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R11	Mechanical Engineering	PhD	35 years	Author of research on the subject
R12	Production Engineering	PhD	20 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R13	Social Communication	PhD	34 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R14	Mechanical production engineering	PhD	20 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R15	Civil Engineering	PhD	21 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R16	Economist	PhD	32 years	Author of book and research on the subject
R17	Administration	Master	19 years	Management of CSR projects
R18	Veterinary medicine	PhD	42 years	Author of book and research on the subject; consultancy on the subject

results obtained by organizations were mentioned. It was found that, in general, companies top management is committed to CSR actions and follow defined rules on projects. In addition, the interviewees highlighted professionalism and employee's engagement. It is so common in Brazil to verify high rates of volunteers interested in participating in CSR initiatives. The importance of the aspects mentioned are debated in the studies of [Terrero-De La Rosa et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Munro et al. \(2018\)](#). Some positive results obtained by companies also were highlighted by respondents and they agree with [Aracil \(2019\)](#) about better results being achieved when companies developed CSR practices directly related to their core activities.

Focusing on the analysis of the weak points (weaknesses), it was observed more issues mentioned by respondents when compared to

“strengths” points. Regarding senior management, despite commitment, respondents mentioned that CEO and executive directors could participate more directly in CSR initiatives. This action could provide a more realistic view of stakeholder's problems. Another negative point mentioned is related to the fact that many Brazilian companies still do not assess more deeply the impacts caused by their productive activities.

Many companies still develop CSR projects without clear objectives and without understanding the plausible benefits. This is also mentioned by respondents as a weakness of many organizations. As a consequence, companies present difficulties to assess initiatives performances and change behaviours in the all-production chain. [Cazeri et al. \(2017\)](#) argue about assessing initiatives performances in this study. It was mentioned that many companies carry out CSR activities not aligned with corporate strategies, compromising significant results. This last information and the non-visualization of the plausible benefits to be achieved is corroborated by [Caiado et al. \(2018\)](#). Despite a small proportion of companies, respondents also mentioned that in Brazil it is possible to observe companies that use CSR practices as a greenwashing tool and this is an extremely weak point.

Considering the definition of stakeholder's objectives, respondents mentioned that dialogue with the communities, in general, need to be conducted in a closer manner to better understand the real people problems and how to promote community empowerment. Furthermore, many companies forget to consider their employees as possible beneficiaries of projects performed (many of them may also have needed). Many projects create too many expectations and do not promote self-sufficiency for basic purposes. It is necessary to give prominence to community local leaders aim to enable them to manage the projects and become initiatives sustainable.

The small participation of anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, among other specialists in the debates of idealization and the execution of the projects were considered by respondents as a weak point, despite the professionalism and employees' engagement in CSR projects, also pointed out. The participation of mentioned specialists could lead to better analysis and results.

Finally, as weaknesses, it was mentioned the existence of isolated initiatives without integration, without considering previous projects and the lack of periodic reviews regarding social project objectives to always meet stakeholders' needs.

Following the next SWOT quadrant, the interviewees presented information regarding “opportunities”. The first opportunity highlighted by them was some government incentives to companies with recognized results of social projects, for example, tax exemptions and financing from National Bank for Economic and Social Development. Some companies still do not know about this opportunity. In addition, by truly presenting sustainability concerns, the company can conquer a share of consumers that increase in the market, obtaining returns. These statements are in line with [Andrea and Rodri \(2014\)](#) considerations.

Opportunities related to production processes improvements were also highlighted by respondents. Using data from previously developed sustainable projects and lessons learned, companies can perform a critical analysis on their processes, increasing them. By the way, critical analysis processes may be expanded to review all CSR practices, policies and performance. The definition of more assertive objectives aligned with UN SDGs and communities' needs may be considered opportunities.

Despite companies using some requirements and guidelines when developing CSR projects, the respondents still see opportunities to use others management tools and methodologies in order to achieve better results. As an example, agile management projects tools were cited.

Still regarding opportunities, it is observed that in Brazil there is a predisposition of a proportion of society to participate in social projects, resulting in opportunities to companies use this volunteer potential and to develop a strategic partnership with the local community. Establishing programs for selecting and hiring employees in the local community can greatly contribute to this. Finally, partnerships among

different companies and universities in order to develop conjoint CSR projects and train future professionals were mentioned as opportunities.

In the last quadrant of the SWOT matrix, respondents commented about “threats” that may compromise CSR practices developed by companies in the Brazilian context. The first threat mentioned was related to the existence of prejudices and political polarization that may devalue the importance of CSR projects. In addition, the lack of appreciation associated with professionals who work in the area in many companies and the lack of third sector recognition by some parts of businessmen were also highlighted. This may discourage some future professionals to work in these areas.

Respondents also mentioned that the Brazilian institutional environment does not emphatically promote the importance of CSR practices and that the constant increase of productive operations costs may compromise social activities in some companies. In addition, economic and political instabilities may discourage investors concerned with sustainable practices. These themes are discussed by Kelley et al. (2019); Li et al. (2010); and Mugova et al. (2017).

In the same item, respondents also highlighted the lack of corporate governance principles by many companies and the existence of few inspection organizations to identify irregularities. This last fact may hamper irregularity notifications and undermine CSR importance dissemination. It is necessary to have a clear structure regarding requirements to be followed and consequences.

Finally, the respondents mentioned as “threats” the lack of knowledge by society regarding companies’ commitments to sustainability and the low appreciation of sustainable products by a large part of the Brazilian population. In the respondent’s point of view, these aspects may devalue CSR practices. Considering the information presented, the SWOT matrix was structured (see Table 3 part a), b), c), and d).

Analysing the SWOT matrix, it is possible to observe more weakness than strengths, evidencing that the practices of CSR developed by Brazilian companies need a better structuring by the managers. There were five strengths against eleven weakness. A weakness that can be observed as a root of several problems is related to the fact that many times, CSR activities are not aligned with corporate strategies, compromising significant results, corroborating the argument of Cazeri et al. (2018).

When opportunities and threats are considered, numerically, they are balanced. But some items should be highlighted in both groups. An outstanding opportunity is the predisposition of a proportion of society to participate in social projects, which shows that companies should consider a strategic issue to reach better results. Regarding the threats, there are two points of major concerns: consecutive increases in productive operations costs may compromise social activities in some companies, and economic and political instabilities may discourage investors concerned of sustainable practices. These items can indeed influence the other items.

## 5. Conclusions and final considerations

As highlighted in the introductory section, this study aimed to structure a SWOT matrix of CSR practices developed by Brazilian companies based on information provided by 18 experienced professionals. The study had an exploratory character, aiming to better understand Brazilian companies’ scenario. Considering the results presented, it is possible to say that the main objective was achieved.

The implications of the paper are three-fold. Firstly, it presents an overview on the extent to which Brazilian companies pursue CSR, showing that there are more to do. Secondly, it describes the potentials, as well as some weaknesses related to the implementation of CSR. Finally, outlines some of the opportunities, especially those related to production processes, which may assist the efforts undertaken by companies to place sustainability more central in their operative frameworks. In our viewpoint, these aspects present implications to theory and practice. For practice, managers can use the information to critically analyze their companies and thus debate possibilities for improvement.

**Table 3**

Part a) SWOT matrix structured - Quadrant One (Source: interviews data).

### Strengths - Quadrant One

- 1) In general, the top management of companies is committed to CSR actions.
- 2) Regulations and laws are used to develop these projects.
- 3) Employees engaged in CSR projects act with professionalism.
- 4) General, the number of volunteers interested in participating in CSR projects is high.
- 5) Companies achieve interesting results when CSR actions are directly associated with the company’s core business

Part b) SWOT matrix structured - Quadrant Two (Source: interviews data).

### Weaknesses - Quadrant Two

- 1) CEO and executive directors could participate more directly in CSR initiatives.
- 2) Many Brazilian companies still do not assess more deeply the impacts caused by their productive activities.
- 3) Many companies still develop CSR projects without clear objectives and without understanding the plausible benefits.
- 4) Companies present difficulties to assess initiatives performances and change behaviours in the all-production chain.
- 5) Many times, CSR activities are not aligned with corporate strategies, compromising significant results.
- 6) Some companies use CSR practices only as greenwashing.
- 7) Dialogue with the communities, in general, need to be conducted in a closer manner.
- 8) Many companies forget to consider their employees as possible beneficiaries of projects performed.
- 9) Many projects create too many expectations and do not promote the self-sufficiency of beneficiaries.
- 10) Small participation of specialists like anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, among others in the plan and execution of projects.
- 11) The existence of isolated initiatives without integration, without considering previously projects and the lack of periodic reviews regarding social project objectives.

Part c) SWOT matrix structured - Quadrant Three (Source: interviews data).

### Opportunities - Quadrant Three

- 1) Companies with recognized results of social projects may enjoy governmental incentives, for example, tax exemptions and financing from National Bank for Economic and Social Development.
- 2) Companies may conquer a share of consumers that value sustainability and increase in the market.
- 3) By conducting critical analysis on processes, CSR practices and organizational policies, companies may improve their performance.
- 4) The definition of more assertive objectives aligned with UN Ss and communities’ needs may be considered opportunities.
- 5) Opportunities to use others management tools and methodologies to achieve better results, for example, agile management projects tools.
- 6) A predisposition of a proportion of society to participate in social projects.
- 7) Establishment of programs for selecting and hiring employees in the local community.
- 8) Opportunities to create partnerships among different companies and universities to develop conjoint CSR projects and train future professionals.

Part d) SWOT matrix structured - Quadrant Four (Source: interviews data).

### Threats - Quadrant Four

- 1) Prejudices and political polarization that may devalue CSR projects importance.
- 2) Lack of professional’s valorisation who work in the CSR area in many companies and lack of recognition from the third sector by many businessmen (They may discourage some future professionals to work in these areas).
- 3) The Brazilian institutional environment needs to promote the importance of CSR practices in a more emphatic way, otherwise, practices may be devalued.
- 4) Consecutive increases in productive operations costs may compromise social activities in some companies.
- 5) Economic and political instabilities may discourage investors concerned about sustainable practices.
- 6) Lack of corporate governance principles by many companies and the existence of few inspection organizations to identify irregularities hamper the notification of problems and may prejudice CSR image.
- 7) Lack of knowledge by society regarding companies’ commitments to sustainability and the low appreciation of sustainable products by a large part of the Brazilian population may devalue CSR practices.

For theory, the results presented can be used as a knowledge base for future research. The business scenario after the COVID-19 pandemic will probably demand more proactive behaviour regarding their



environment and social responsibilities. In this sense, condensed information from specialists can be of great value for companies to start or improve their CSR practices.

When considering each group in the SWOT analysis, it is possible to observe that in the strengths, people engagement is a core asset of companies; in the weakness, the lack of planning should be a main focus of concern; regarding the opportunities, the better use of CSR projects benefits by companies and society should be sought; and in relation to the threats, the lack of understanding about CSR projects importance by companies and society and the lack of prioritization of these projects by the companies are important aspects to be addressed by managers and researchers. We believe that the findings of this study are an important basis for debates that can enhance the actions towards the improvement of CSR practices developed by Brazilian companies. Although this study focused on Brazilian reality, several threats are similar to other emerging countries. Thus, the findings presented here may stimulate the debates among these countries.

Like all exploratory research, this study also presents limitations. The first one refers to the sample size (18 experienced professionals); despite their qualifications, a greater sample could provide more robust results. The second limitation lies in the fact that the results presented here reflect interviewees perception (other professionals may present different opinions) and the study considered a broad context of companies in Brazil, without specifying any sector of companies or kind of projects.

As future studies propositions, we recommend research derived from highlighted in this research. Methods and tools can be structured to help companies overcome them. As an example, we mention the structuring of simple models that help companies to measure the impacts caused by production systems in terms of sustainability, contemplating not only environmental but also social aspects. Or even mechanisms to make more easily assess sustainable performance throughout the entire production chain, including social aspects. Another interesting possibility would be to evaluate how the participation of anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, among other professionals in sustainable projects developed by companies potentialize the results. In addition, we also recommend developing SWOT matrices considering experts opinions about CSR companies reality of other countries.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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