

Chapter 43

Corporate Social Responsibility in the Agri–Food Sector

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development is desired not only for public institutions but also for private companies that have realized the importance of sustainable management of limited resources available to mankind. The activity of large transnational corporations is not guided only by the principle of profit maximization, but also by corporate social responsibility (CSR). This chapter focuses on CSR programs run by agri-food companies taking into account the particularities of their activity and the importance of the consumers' behavior to improve the activity of companies in the CSR area. On the one hand, making profits is a desideratum of any company, but on the other hand, companies in the agri-food sector must also ensure the observance of the food safety principles and consumer protection. This is also demonstrated by the major implications of the scandals generated by food contamination with various bacteria or chemicals. Consumer force shapes the activity of these companies, and intense competition leads the managers of these companies to run various CSR programs that eventually lead to increased visibility of the firm and to improving economic indicators. The objective of the chapter is to establish the specificities of the agri-food sector companies. These companies have a high responsibility taking into account the impact of food consumption on the health of the population in the short, medium, and long term and the consequences of this situation on the investments that had to be made in the health sector. The final consumer is a force that sanctions the inappropriate behavior of food producers, but he/she must have a good food education in order to be able to remodel the activity of agri-food companies.

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INTRODUCTION

CSR is a concept that remodels the business, especially transnational companies that are the main promoters of CSR programs. The importance of CSR concerns is demonstrated and involved by other entities in different CSR programs, namely small and medium-sized enterprises, portfolio investors, universities or even banks and stock exchanges (Grigorescu & Saseanu, 2010;; Nica, 2013; Popescu & Huru, 2016, Siminica & Sichigea, 2018; Sima & Gheorghe, 2019; Siminica et al., 2019). Moreover, international institutions such as the United Nations or EU officials have been involved in promoting the concept by developing and promoting various principles that guide the work of companies or public institutions. Thus, based on Global Compact principles used internationally by corporations, Principles for Management Responsible Education, the Melbourne Principal for Sustainable Cities, the Global Compact Cities Program or the Responsible Investing Principles have been developed. Within the European Union, the concerns of the authorities regarding sustainable development and CSR are very much intensive, and specific strategies and normative norms are set up to encourage companies to run different CSR programs but also to publish non-financial information so that stakeholders can base their economic decisions on proper data. So, CSR is an instrument to build a socially and environmentally sustainable future (Sanova, 2013)

The authors' aim is to analyze the importance of CSR for agri-food companies as the current food system relies on non-energy resources, and companies in the field are in a dramatic battle for air, soil and water. The issues of agri-food sector sustainability and CSR activities are specific in the context of the challenges imposed by the transition to bio-economy. These companies, through their production activity, have a major impact on natural capital and raw materials (Vilké et al., 2015; Topp-Becker & Ellis, 2017). In addition, certain social and environmental conditions are needed throughout the entire production system to produce healthy and quality products.

The use of genetically modified organisms, the high level of pesticides or the welfare of animals are priority issues for both consumers and agri-food companies (Stancu, 2012; Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2015). In addition, food waste, overproduction of food, but also starvation that affects a large part of the planet's population are challenges for companies, consumers and public authorities (Ene, 2013; Bilaska et al., 2015). Food waste has not only economic consequences but also social and environmental implications in the sense that it slows down social progress, requires and consumes non-renewable resources and causes unnecessary pollution of the environment through both production and storage subsequent deterioration of unconsumed products.

So, the companies from the agri-food sector must manifest social responsibility on two levels: the quantity and the quality of the produced goods. The quantity had to be dimensioned to meet the population's food needs, and to avoid the waste of food. The quality of the products must be in line with the standards imposed by the authorities in order to ensure the good health of the population in the short, medium and long term.

The novelty of our research lies in analyzing CSR for agri-food sector companies in the context of Sustainable Development Goals that increase the responsibility of these companies towards both consumers and society in general. Despite the efforts of international organizations and European authorities to harmonize the dissemination rules of non-financial information, data regarding the CSR activity of companies are presented in various forms, which creates difficulties for stakeholders in comparing information provided by different firms.

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