OVERVIEW ON THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF PUBLIC SECTOR

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to extend our understanding of the concept of social responsibility in the public sector. The article is built around two main dimensions of public sector social responsibility while highlighting the most important characteristics for each of them. Data is collected from various publications, such as scientific articles, reports, books, newspaper articles. The conclusion of this study is that the adoption of social responsibility practices provide legitimacy to the public administration, also contributing to improving cooperation with other entities, increasing its transparency and the promotion of the common responsibility of all those involved in the public sphere.
Keywords: regulations, policy on corporate social responsibility, cooperation, citizen participation, transparency

1. INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, the concept of social responsibility in the public sector was considered weird because public organizations were supposed to be "of public interest". Moreover, these entities were held accountable due to pressure from civil society (Dănuţ, 2015a). Currently, the concept is becoming increasingly important (Vasquez et al., 2016) because the sector's activities have an economic, social and environmental impact. Its adoption helps improve the intangible assets of public sector organizations, while contributing to increasing trust in the public sector, to strengthening the relationships and reputation of its entities, as well as to enhancing the sustainability of the organizational process (Hernandez, 2007).

Social responsibility in the public sector represents the voluntary integration of social and environmental concerns into public organizations' activities (Dochot, 2014) and their interactions with citizens (CICAP, 2016). Moreover, this involves (Dănuţ, 2015b):

- *Elaborating and implementing laws and regulations.* It is an implicit function of public organizations. Normative acts should reflect the needs of companies and society, while also encouraging and facilitating citizens' actions against companies with irresponsible behavior (Zappala, 2003).

- The public sector lays down the legal minimum requirements on environmental and social issues in order to facilitate the resolution of citizens' problems. Regarding consumer protection laws in European Union countries, in addition to the minimum requirements to be met by products and services, mechanisms for filing complaints about non-compliance with quality standards should also be included.

- *Initiating responsible public policies.* The public sector can set a clear and transparent framework by developing public policies that facilitate the alignment of business practices with social responsibility

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objectives.

- *Ensuring efficient and effective organizational governance.* Public organizations are required to adopt international principles and best practices in their field of activity and integrate them into codes, statutes and other documents governing their operations.

- *Making public investments that respect the principles of efficiency, effectiveness and economy.* Public investment should meet the following criteria: use of green technologies, transparency and efficient use of public money, community involvement in selecting investment projects, development and implementation of clear investment rules, development of public-private partnerships.

- *Promoting philanthropy and involving in community issues.* They are usually private sector-specific social responsibility actions. However, public organizations can take part in corporate social responsibility activities to increase their impact. This participation may be direct or take the form of incentives.

- *Involving stakeholders in the activities and leadership of public organizations.* This involvement is essential for the correct identification of the community needs in which public organizations operate as well as the beneficiaries of their activities (Ajiake, 2015).

- *Increasing transparency in all activities of public organizations.* Citizens should be informed about the spending of public money by public sector entities.

The public sector becomes socially responsible for the following reasons: strengthening the reputation of the organization in the community and its image in the media; increasing confidence in the public sector; attracting skilled individuals to the public sector; increasing staff motivation; improving relationships with all stakeholders (companies, suppliers, other public organizations, the media, citizens/clients etc.).

Fox et al. (2002) consider that social responsibility in the public sector have four functions:

- *Mandating.* The governments set the minimum legal framework for the business sector activities.

- *Facilitating.* The public sector stimulates the companies to adopt the social responsibility goals.

- *Partnering.* The strategic partnerships between public sector, private sector and civil society on solving complex social and environmental issues are essential.

- *Endorsing.* It means supporting the concept of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) by the public sector through the following aspects: public policies, public procurement, recognition of companies' efforts, etc.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted by using a qualitative method. The document analysis method was preferred in order to investigate the dimensions of the social responsibility of public sector.

Document analysis is an important method used in qualitative research for many years (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This involves examining various documents, such as scientific articles, reports, books, newspaper articles, etc. Although this method is often used together with other methods, some researchers use it as the only research method. In certain situations, the use of pre-existing documents allows researchers to have access to the best source of data in order to develop a scientific paper. Moreover, the method proves to be very useful in studies exploring behaviors in violent environments, which would expose the researcher to an additional risk if using other methods (Goldstein, 2014). Although research conducted with data obtained from secondary sources could be considered less valuable than research carried out through fieldwork, it could still provide essential information and be useful due to the stability of the data (Morgan, 2022).

3. DIMENSIONS OF THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF PUBLIC SECTOR

Social responsibility in the public sector covers two dimensions: external - public policy on corporate social responsibility; and internal - the institutional functioning of the sector (Hawrysz and Foltys, 2016).

3.1. Public policy on corporate social responsibility

The public authorities' actions are essential to reducing business risks, contributing to the development of the private sector, and encouraging the competitiveness and responsibility of companies (Kombate and Wanxiao, 2017). According to the European Commission, public authorities should play a supporting role for companies through a smart mix of voluntary policy measures and, where necessary, complementary regulations to promote transparency, create incentives for responsible behavior and encourage corporate responsibility (Tucă and Rădulescu, 2012).

Moreover, the governments have an interest in CSR (Albareda et al., 2007; Albareda et al., 2008) because this concept can complement their efforts to create an attractive business environment, but also to develop their countries (Steurer, 2010). The experience of the Western European countries shows that the CSR integration in the activity of companies increases the country's investment attractiveness as well as the labor productivity and contributes to solving environmental and human rights problems, etc.

However, the challenge for the authorities is to identify incentives in order to support the socially responsible companies. The public authorities can support the CSR in the following ways:

- *Regulations*: elaboration of normative acts regulating the activity of companies, as well as recommendations for the state-owned companies (Štreimikienė and Pušinaitė, 2009). The authorities should create an appropriate legal framework, but also eliminate inappropriate behaviors by imposing rules in different areas such as environment, labor, etc.

  The development of a regulatory framework regarding CSR in the private sector is of particular importance (Ward 2004). The State or Public Sector is the only body that can establish the general policy and regulations for the activities carried out in the business sector (Vogel, 2018). In order to help companies improve their social and environmental performance, the state or public sector should identify clear standards for all companies. According to Fox (2002), the state or public sector has several key CSR attributes:

  - The different public authorities, local, territorial or central, could establish a legal framework with minimum performance standards for companies (regarding air, water, soil emissions etc.), including punitive measures if necessary.

  - Public authorities could provide incentives to private entities involved in social responsibility actions, such as tax deductions or penalties, funding for research activities or information analysis, prizes, etc.

  - Creating partnerships between public and private sectors in order to solve complex social or environmental problems or to achieve public policy goals.

- *Dialogue, cooperation, and informing companies about CSR implementation opportunities.* The authorities should find ways to facilitate companies' understanding of and compliance with mandatory minimum standards required by legislation (especially regarding child labor).

- *Inclusion of CSR elements in public policies related to industry, commerce, the environment and employment*. Nowadays, the major challenge of public sector entities is identifying priorities and incentives that are useful in both the local and national contexts, while taking into account current initiatives and capacities. Moreover, public sector bodies have the opportunity to use the current enthusiasm for CSR to meet public policy objectives and priorities (Fox et al., 2002).

- *Introduction of compulsory courses into the university curriculum*. Ever since the late 1990s, universities have gradually begun to integrate elements of CSR and sustainability into their curricula (Wright and

Bennett 2011; Brammer et al. 2012). Teaching aspects related to social responsibility contributed to increasing students' knowledge both practically and theoretically (Smith et al. 2018; Schimperna et al., 2022).

Moreover, over time, universities have created and introduced new methods and techniques to teach CSR and sustainable development (Figueiró and Raufflet 2015; Gatti et al. 2019), such as: the case study method, problem-based learning, and learning by doing and by experience. Furthermore, the need to incorporate ethical standards as well as the sustainable development of public and private entities (Hesselbarth and Schaltegger, 2014; Burga et al., 2017) has determined universities to introduce CSR issues in the curricula contributing to the adoption of ethical decisions in society in the long term and to increasing the business performance (Tormo-Carbó et al. 2019; Claver-Cortés et al., 2020).

▪ *Involvement of companies in developing CSR standards.* This improves the interaction between the public and private sectors in addressing social and environmental challenges (Ascoli and Benzaken, 2009).

▪ *Implementation of international CSR principles, public recognition of socially responsible companies.* Public recognition could be given by offering prizes as well as by mentioning the companies in public speeches, especially when they get involved a lot and beyond the minimum standards.

▪ *The own example in public procurement.* The public sector has an important role in promoting social responsibility among companies as a purchaser of goods, services and works (McCrudden, 2007; Snider et al., 2013). It should serve as an example of a responsible consumer by formulating requirements for public procurement of goods, services and works that do not harm the environment and whose specifications comply with the highest ethical and social standards (Bell, 2002; Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 2007).

As a purchaser, the public authorities can influence the private sector by setting minimum requirements for their suppliers in areas such as health, safety and environmental protection, labour force inclusion, and quality of work conditions. These aspects can serve as scoring criteria.

The introduction of environmental protection criteria in public procurement procedures is an international priority. The European Commission has recommended the use of public procurement to protect the environment. The Marrakech United Nations meeting has created a structure to develop tools to promote sustainable public procurement.

The social responsibility concept should also be applied in the state-owned companies (Dănuţ, 2015a). As a shareholder, the state should ensure that each state-owned company takes into account the concept of corporate social responsibility. If a company fails to adequately prioritize this concept, the state should consider replacing the board of directors.

3.2. Institutional functioning

The public sector should exhibit socially responsible behavior both in the provision of services and in the organization of daily operations within each institution (AID România and NORGESVEL, 2010). In this regard, the public sector should focus on the following issues (Hernandez, 2007; Quezada, 2012):

▪ *To facilitate citizen participation in the public decision-making process;*

Citizens can participate in public decision-making process by public consultation organized by the authorities. They can be consulted in two ways: consultation with a small group of interests and consultation with the public (Profiroiu, 2007).

Consultation with a small group of interests is easy and quick, requiring few resources. It can be done in writing or through meetings. The meetings should not be representative, but should focus on identifying solutions to solve the problems.

Consultation with the public involves time and resources. Ideally, it should be complemented by other

methods, such as round tables, but this rarely happens. The public opinion is required to avoid the potential difficulties in implementing one of the solutions identified to solve the problem. Until the appearance of the internet, these consultations were difficult. If all citizens wanted to express their opinion, a referendum would be organized. Currently, the documents are posted on the organization's website and anyone can share its opinion.

According to some authors (Profiroiu şi Popescu, 2003; Profiroiu, 2007), there are several ways to involve citizens' in decision-making process at the local level:

- Involvement of citizens in the economic development

It is done when elaborating local development strategies. The community representatives who will bear the consequences of the development should be involved in the project development. Their involvement should not be limited to a simple participation.

- Participation of the citizens in the development of the budget

Local authorities should inform citizens annually about the local budget revenues, and citizens should be able to specify which services they want. If the authorities should extend public lighting, sewerage, gas supply and there is not enough money for all projects, it is necessary to consult citizens in order to find out which aspect represent a priority. In this regard, citizens' consultative councils are set up.

- Participation of citizens in the decision-making process of borrowing

Citizens should participate in the decision making process of borrowing by the local government, because they will bear the costs (through increased taxes and fees, by giving up some services), and banks want a guarantee that the loan will be repaid.

- *To increase the transparency and responsibility of public administration.*

The public sector should communicate relevant information in order to enable citizens to understand its activities and how public money is spent. Moreover, it should facilitate citizens' access to information about its work and assume responsibilities for the generated effects.

Although the social responsibility is a voluntary initiative, an organization that accepts should be responsible for its decisions and actions. However, this does not apply to public institutions, which are funded by public money and therefore required to be transparent.

- *To know the stakeholders, including their rights, responsibilities and level of importance; to dialogue with them*. In this way, public institutions and bodies could strengthen their relationship with stakeholders, as an expression of their socially responsible behavior.

- *To respect human rights, diversity and equal opportunities*.

Human rights and the tools to respect them are at the core of many debates. In this context, states or public administrations have to actively contribute to preventing human rights violations, not only by companies, but also by entities in other sectors, such as public and nonprofit sectors. The state or public administration should become a supervisor to ensure respect for human rights and equity at work, especially as an employer of a large workforce at the national level. It should focus on promoting fairer practices and diversity policies in the workplace despite the persisting difficulties and challenges (Strachan, 2011).

- *To be concerned about the effects of its activities on the environment and society.*

In addition, public organizations should integrate environment and society issues in their daily activities in order to solve them. The state or public sector should support the application of environmental policies as well as European and international standards in this field. Moreover, it should have an active and constructive role in solving environmental problems at the local, regional and national level.

- *To provide answers to civil society requirements or to anticipate them,* paying attention to social change and society issues.

Civil society represents the space between the state and the family or company where voluntarily established organizations promote and protect the interests of their members (Cooper, 2018). These organizations are distinct from the state and possess a certain autonomy and independence. However, the full autonomy and independence of some of them has been compromised by accepting funding from the state. In a broad sense, civil society includes different types of organizations, such as non-governmental entities, community organizations, religious organizations, etc., as well as a range of organizational forms, from highly structured and regulated to more informal forms in terms of structure and way of operation (Păceşilă, 2016; McInerney, 2022).

In different global contexts, civil society has proven to be an indispensable partner for the government or public sector in addressing challenges related to the provision of public services and support to citizens, especially during economic or political crises. Despite this, civil society and government are often reluctant to collaborate due to often-complex political, economic and social liaisons, or national historical events. Although they may sometimes lack the ability to do so, both should engage in formal collaboration. Moreover, the dialogue becomes particularly important, as the two parties can capitalize on their experience and knowledge as agents of change. In this regard, the public sector should develop an empirical model of interaction and relations with civil society organizations.

- *To redefine the public sector by introducing management techniques from the private sector*

It is not a question of the literal transposition of management techniques from the private sector into public organizations, but of adapting them to the specificities of public entities. The reform involves not only the transformation of citizens into customers, but also other aspects such as quality management, transparency and customer-oriented management, as well as redefining the workforce in terms of useful profiles and skills, aiming for the figure of the worker - entrepreneur rather than that of the civil servant (Rondeaux, 2014).

Moreover, in order to provide quality public services to its citizens, the public sector should integrate entrepreneurial elements in providing them, so that citizens become the determinants of both the positive and negative aspects of the service offered (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2007; Jatmikowati et al., 2019).

- *To change the way of administration and operation of its organizations.*

The concept of social responsibility extends to the public sector, although its voluntary, progressive and majority application by private sector organizations has prevailed until recently (Yera, 2010). In this context, social responsibility in the public sector involves enhancing the democratic quality of public administration institutions. This means innovation in the public sector by applying social responsibility strategies in order to contribute to social development. Moreover, introducing values such as political ethics, transparency, citizen participation as well as open governance leads to improving social trust (Gámez et al, 2016).

Social responsibility is the subject of a wide debate as well as controversies regarding its imperative or voluntary way of action. It is important to promote social responsibility in the private sector; however, as social awareness has increased, governments and public administrations should become more and more active in this field, as an element of economic development. Beyond the regulatory obligation, the assumption of social responsibility by governments and public administrations would give value to their economic, social and environmental performance (Gámez et al., 2016).

- *To create ethical codes,* starting from the values, motivations and scope of public organizations. They could contribute to establishing and managing organizational values with a methodology consistent with social responsibility.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper explores the concept of social responsibility of public sector, particularly focusing on its two

dimensions: CSR policies and institutional functioning. The aim of this article is to provide a better understanding of this concept, which plays an important role in increasing confidence in the public sector's activities and contributes to improving its relations with other organizations and with society as a whole. In this regard, the ways in which public authorities could support the social responsibility of companies are identified. Moreover, the most important characteristics of a socially responsible behavior both in the provision of services and in the organization of daily operations in each institution are summarized.

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