

STUDY ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WITHIN AGRICULTURAL SMEs IN THE SOUTH-MUNTENIA REGION, ROMANIA

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Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be a basic element of regional sustainable development (SD), but this aspect is conditioned by the authorities' support. Even if, at present, social responsibility isn't well known and implemented in Romania, through a good cooperation between the public sector, the private one and the authorities, it is possible to increase the standard of living of the local population, especially for the inhabitants of rural environment. In order to assess the level of knowledge and applicability of CSR campaigns, a 19-question questionnaire has been drawn up and distributed online and physically, in order to obtain as many responses as possible. By addressing the questionnaire to a category with a good representativeness in the South-Muntenia Region, namely that of the managers of SMEs in the agricultural sector, it turned out that the interest in these subjects is low, in a first phase only 51 responses were obtained online, which means 7.29% from the requests. After the second stage, that of physical meetings, a total of 321 responses were received, i.e. 53.14%. As a result of the investigation, it can be concluded that the agricultural managers of the South-Muntenia Region don't have confidence in the success of social responsibility actions, as a result they don't want to allocate a part of their turnover to set this mechanism in motion, especially since about 20% of those interviewed aren't interested in the sustainable development of the region.

Key words: corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainable development (SD), agricultural sector, SME, South-Muntenia Region

INTRODUCTION

According to several authors from all over the world [2, 3, 5, 11, 13], social responsibility is a way that contributes to sustainable development, especially in rural areas, which has been neglected for a long time [12]. This is especially true for Romania, where we can say that the agricultural sector is a significant recipient of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The role of SMEs in regional development is a large, indisputable one, which has managed to add social values to the already existing and implicit economic ones. Policymakers are currently paying special attention to the role of SMEs. In this sense, they created a series of laws, resolutions and all kinds of facilities to support their development [14]. So, we could say that

SMEs are a balancing factor for economic and social life, at the local and regional level. In terms of sustainable development, SMEs seem to be the main form of organization for a sustainable development of the world. As traditional agricultural practices negatively affect resources, the environment and human health [1], the need for sustainable agriculture has become a pressing issue. Sustainable agriculture, in turn, is essential for sustainable development, as agriculture has been and will continue to be the generator of the economy [8]. The change is the one that leads to dynamic sustainability against the background of reducing consumption and designing a safer future for humanity and the Planet, but also for regional and national spaces [10]. Over time, the rural environment was affected by very low living conditions, which led

young people to go to nearby cities or, on the contrary, outside the country [4]. They were no longer interested in the resuscitation of local communities, which is very visible in the evolution of human resources in the rural environment [6]. Farm consolidation is mainly based on supporting members of recognized associative forms, young farmers, farms in disadvantaged areas, and over time will have the effect of improving farm incomes. Considering their economic importance and environmental aspects, it is also absolutely necessary to accelerate the restructuring and modernization of agricultural holdings [9], to ensure the development of a competitive and sustainable agriculture in accordance with the requirements of cross-compliance. The participation of rural communities' members in the local development process and the encouragement of innovative actions cannot be achieved without risks [7], which are inevitable when it comes to new initiatives, aimed at helping to find new solutions to old problems, introducing and developing new products, the modernization of traditional activities through the application of new technologies and others. Through the questionnaire, two sets of results were intended to be obtained, and others came naturally, following the attempt to achieve as many concrete answers as possible. The two initial objectives were proposed in this research:

- (1) establishing the level of knowledge, understanding and application of the concepts of CSR and SD in each of the counties of the South-Muntenia Region of Romania;
- (2) establishing the degree to which SME managers want to get involved in the sustainable development of the South-Muntenia Region through CSR initiatives.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the last decade, conducting studies based on questionnaires has been increasingly appreciated, even in the consumer market, for the collection of statistical data, but also for the evaluation of knowledge and the desire to

act. It is, by far, the most effective way to collect answers to multiple questions, allowing people to voice their opinions on a given topic.

It is necessary to start by stating that the research topic that is the subject of the questionnaire isn't a well-known one that is on everyone's lips, for the following reasons:

- many of the SME managers in Romania haven't heard of the organizational social responsibility (CSR) concept;
- those who heard about CSR believed that it didn't directly target them and, therefore, avoided any involvement in actions of this kind;
- SMEs don't have the necessary resources to plan and support CSR initiatives;
- SMEs aren't obliged, according to the law, to carry out CSR campaigns.

In order to draw up the questionnaire, it was determined that a brief introduction to the topic addressed is very useful, so that each of those surveyed knows what it is about and to be able to associate these aspects with those carried out by them in the current activity of their companies. For the question part, several components were used and a concentrated format was chosen, so that in the shortest possible time required to complete it, to obtain as much useful information as possible. The detailed structure of the questionnaire is shown in Fig. 1.

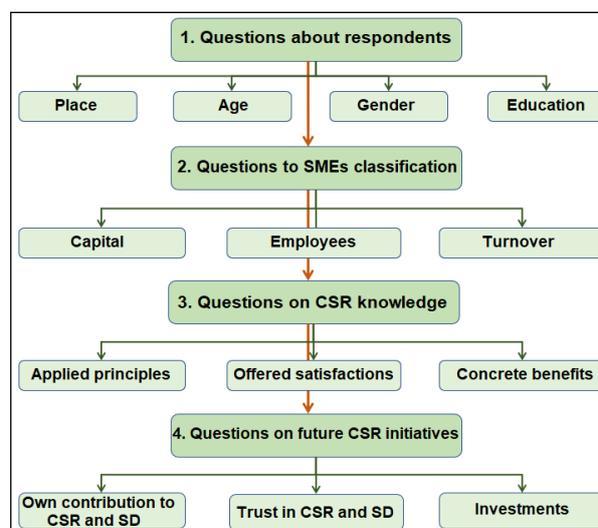


Fig. 1. The chart for planning the development of the questionnaire, with its categories of questions
 Source: Own determination.

In the end, the questionnaire had a total number of 19 questions, of which 18 were grids and one was a matrix. The optimal time required to go through and fill in the questionnaire is a maximum of 10 minutes.

The questionnaire is addressed to the agricultural SMEs in the South-Muntenia Region. The sample size was $n = 372$ managers of SMEs, considered representative for $N =$ total number of SMEs' managers operating in the seven counties of South Muntenia region.

Cochran's sample size formula (1977) was used for $p=0.5$, $t = 1.96$ and marginal error $e=0.05$.

According to all the analyses compiled and presented in tabular and graphical form, agriculture is one of the basic areas of the region, still insufficiently exploited and with a great potential for development.

This was also the reason why it was considered that the social responsibility realized and implemented by very small, small and medium-sized companies, very numerous, can generate a flow of development of the region.

At the same time, large companies, whether they also have an agricultural profile, already apply social responsibility strategies, but they are few in number, more precisely in the South-Muntenia Region there are only 4.

For the homogeneity of the study, given the research period, namely February 2021 - February 2022, two ways of applying the questionnaire were approached: online and physical, in this way managing to identify what percentage of managers are interested in the issue of organizational social responsibility and in the possibility of sustainable regional development for the coming years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The online survey, carried out by sending the online questionnaire, ran from 09.02.2021 to 09.08.2021, during which, every two weeks, the email was retransmitted to those who didn't answered.

In order not to disturb additionally, at the moment of receiving the confirmation of completing the questionnaire, messages of thanks were sent, and the e-mail address of the respective person was removed from the database. In addition, individuals in the target group were contacted by phone regarding the questionnaire and they promised to complete it as soon as possible. None of the interlocutors agreed to complete the questionnaire during the phone conversation, on the grounds that they didn't have time then or that they wanted to read the electronic message first. However, very few responses were received in the 6 months, more precisely only 51 questionnaires from all 7 counties of the Sud-Muntenia Region, which represents only 7.29% of the selected target group.

In autumn of 2021, having less restrictions, physical meetings could be set up with some of the managers of agricultural SMEs in the area, with whom we were able to complete the questionnaires and discuss in detail about CSR.

During the 6 months of online distribution of the questionnaires (09.02.2021 – 09.08.2021), several conclusions were drawn regarding the low response rate:

- (1)during the pandemic, they were assaulted with online requests, which they ultimately decided to ignore, as they involved a considerable waste of time;
- (2)lack of any real benefit as a result of allocating time to provide objective answers;
- (3)agriculture continued its activity throughout the period of restrictions, that is why the managers didn't have more time at their disposal;
- (4)many of the managers in agriculture prefer face-to-face interactions, being used to this by large companies, which send sales agents, customers, with whom they meet in person;
- (5)some of the managers of SMEs don't handle so well the technical part, which is why they don't use the computer and go for classic options – phone discussions and/or meetings;
- (6)some of the managers didn't understood the topic of the questionnaire and preferred not to express their opinion about something

they don't know. In the second part of the research activity, also carried out over a period of 6 months (01.09.2021-01.03.2022), when people active in agriculture had a less crowded period, being the winter period, when the plants are in vegetative rest and agricultural work cannot be carried out, appointments were made by phone and trips were made to farms to complete the questionnaires. It should be noted that all people in the target group were called, except for those who completed the questionnaire in Google Forms, and those with whom an appointment couldn't be arranged fall into one of the following categories:

- (1)no one answered the phone;
- (2)they said they weren't interested in such a discussion;
- (3)they stated that they do'nt have time.

The interviewed managers were much more receptive in the face-to-face interaction, even if they had no knowledge of social responsibility and what their duties would be from the perspective of this concept related to sustainable development. The difficulty was, in this case, in observing the times set for the meetings, especially in the case of counties located at a great distance.

Table 1. Number of CSR questionnaires completed in 2021-2022, distribution according to the way of answering

No.	County	Type	Face to face	Online	Total
		Number			
1	Arges		41	4	45
2	Calarasi		54	4	58
3	Dambovita		44	5	49
4	Giurgiu		42	4	46
5	Ialomita		39	2	41
6	Prahova		48	2	50
7	Teleorman		53	30	83
Total			321	51	372
Share (%)			45.85%	7.29%	53.14%

Source: Own calculation.

During November 2021 – February 2022, the performance of completing up to 8 surveys per day (within eight meetings) was achieved, which was a substantial improvement compared to what happened online. At the end of the 6 months, it was possible to collect a number of 321 questionnaires from the field,

distributed by counties as shown in Table 1, where the online values are also accumulated. At the end of the investigation process by means of the survey, a response rate of 53.14% of the total target group was reached, percentages distributed very differently – 46% of responses for physical and 7% for online. If in the case of the face to face survey there is a fairly high homogeneity between the counties, the online one has broken this balance, tilting the balance in favor of Teleorman county, which has a response rate of 83%. Of the 19 questions, those related to CSR and SD received very interesting responses, often in very different percentages depending on how the responses were collected. It is difficult to address discussions related to CSR as long as there are no promotion and awareness campaigns, and the involvement of the authorities in this area is non-existent. Most of the managers of agricultural SMEs admit that they know very little or not at all (47.5%) what social responsibility is and what does it entails (Table 2).

Table 2. Presentation in parallel of the online and cumulative responses (%), for the question related to the knowledge of CSR

No.	Type	Online	Online + Face to face
	Variant		
1	Very large extent	9.8%	5.4%
2	Large extent	21.6%	12.4%
3	Somewhat	39.2%	34.7%
4	Small extent	19.6%	27.4%
5	At all	9.8%	20.1%

Source: Own calculation.

The problem of sustainable development aroused the interest of the managers, who mastered the subject quite well here. However, even in this case there is no unified vision, and the business environment represented by the SMEs in the South-Muntenia Region, at least the one in agriculture, doesn't seem well connected. Face to face interviewing led most to say they were very interested in such a plan, while the online environment again shows a relaxation on the subject, with opinions split between the

top three variants, but also with people which are not at all interested in the subject, being regardless of whether the region will develop in the future or not (Table 3).

Table 3. Presentation in parallel of the online and cumulative responses (%), for the question regarding the interest in a SD plan

No.	Type Variant	Online	Online + Face to face
1	Very large extent	25.5%	54.3%
2	Large extent	41.2%	28.0%
3	Somewhat	23.5%	11.8%
4	Small extent	7.8%	4.8%
5	At all	2.0%	1.1%

Source: Own calculation.

Several of the questions were mainly related to the future, more precisely to the desire of agricultural SMEs' managers to contribute to regional sustainable development by investing in CSR strategies and campaigns.

Table 4. Number and share of the answers collected in 2021-2022, concerning the desire of SMEs' managers to be involved in increasing the standard of living of the population

No.	Variant County	Very large extent		Large extent		Some-what		Small extent		At all	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	Arges	13	28.9	12	26.7	18	40.0	1	2.2	1	2.2
2	Calarasi	12	20.7	19	32.8	18	31.0	6	10.3	3	5.2
3	Dambovita	18	36.7	10	20.4	13	26.5	5	10.2	3	6.2
4	Giurgiu	13	28.3	9	19.6	14	30.4	8	17.4	2	4.3
5	Ialomita	16	39.0	8	19.5	12	29.3	5	12.2	0	-
6	Prahova	22	44.0	15	30.0	8	16.0	4	8.0	1	2.0
7	Teleorman	31	37.4	21	25.3	23	27.7	5	6.0	3	3.6
	Total	125	33.6	94	25.3	106	28.5	34	9.1	13	3.5
	Online	18	35.3	22	43.1	8	15.7	2	3.9	1	2.0

Source: Own calculation.

Thus, the question related to the managers' desire to get involved and contribute to regional sustainable development by improving the standard of living of the local population was addressed. The collected answers are calculated in Table 4 and aren't at all gratifying, as they highlight that only 58.9% of the managers who were part of the target group want their activity to increase the standard of living of the South-Muntenia Region population. On the most concrete question, SME managers are apprehensive, especially when it comes to investing part of

their turnover in an ambiguous concept that doesn't offer them any certainty. Combining all the aspects analyzed so far as a result of the stated questions, among which the age, level of education and perception of the respondents, the size of the companies, their turnover, opinions on sustainable development, knowledge related to CSR and others, can justify the answers received to this question (Table 5).

Table 5. Number and share of the answers collected in 2021-2022, depending on how much they are willing to invest in CSR actions

No.	County	0.1-1%		1.1-2%		2.1-5%		>5%		0%	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	Arges	19	42.2	8	17.8	4	8.9	3	6.7	11	24.4
2	Calarasi	23	39.7	14	31.1	4	6.9	5	8.6	12	20.7
3	Dambovita	29	59.2	7	14.3	3	6.1	2	4.1	8	16.3
4	Giurgiu	22	47.8	9	19.6	1	2.2	3	6.5	11	23.9
5	Ialomita	18	43.9	8	19.5	2	4.9	4	9.8	9	21.9
6	Prahova	33	66.0	7	14.0	3	6.0	1	2.0	6	12.0
7	Teleorman	42	50.6	15	18.1	7	8.4	4	4.8	15	18.1
	Total	186	50.0	68	18.3	24	6.5	22	5.9	72	19.3
	Online	21	41.2	17	33.3	7	13.7	3	5.9	3	5.9

Source: Own calculation.

See also the parallel with the answers collected exclusively online, which in this case are much more logical, more uniform and given in a much more relaxed state. On the other hand, face-to-face managers were defensive, believing that answering this question would force them to invest that percentage of turnover in social responsibility initiatives. The result was a significantly higher number of those who answered that they would not invest anything at the moment (21.5% of physical respondents and 19.3% of all respondents).

CONCLUSIONS

The survey based on questionnaire aims to evaluate the current situation we face in the region, to find out the opinion of the managers of SMEs active in the agriculture of the South-Muntenia Region regarding organizational social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development (SD), which can be done with the help of CSR strategies, which are currently not known and/or accepted in the business environment. The responses received

from the managers who responded to the questionnaire prepared for this study were analysed for each question separately, and the data were presented in tables and graphs, highlighting the essential aspects for the research topic addressed.

Some conclusions deserved to be drawn as follows:

(1) Interest in the proposed questionnaire was extremely low. As a result, in the 6 months of online distribution of the questionnaire, only 51 responses were obtained, so a success rate of only 7.29%;

(2) In the end it was possible to arrange meetings with 321 managers who did not respond to the online questionnaire, which raised the response rate, in total, to 53.14%, which indicates that the proposed topic is not of interest to very many of those involved in the agricultural business environment of the South-Muntenia Region;

(3) Managers of SMEs in agriculture have a low level of knowledge related to CSR;

(4) Almost 20% of those interviewed would not currently invest in social responsibility actions, and those who would choose the minimum amount, of 0.1-1% of the company's turnover, which however it is a starting point;

(5) Considering all the above, however, more than 73% of the total number of people interviewed state that they trust the concepts of social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development (SD), even if stating this doesn't influence their actions and doesn't imply anything concrete;

(6) There is a significant discrepancy between the answers received in the online version and those collected as a result of face-to-face discussions – anonymity led to a greater number of managers stating that they weren't interested in these topics and don't want to include them in their future activities.

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