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CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN TIME OF PANDEMIC

SPOŁECZNA ODPOWIEDZIALNOŚĆ BIZNESU W CZASIE PANDEMII

Abstract: The extremely difficult situation in which business and society found themselves in the spring of 2020 prompts to pose a question about the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the era of COVID-19 as well as during the post pandemic times. Is redefining of this role necessary or does the current state of knowledge sufficiently explain the role of CSR during chaos and crisis?

Great many companies declare having a social purpose and a set of values they strongly believe in, not to mention their care for employees and other stakeholders. To make good on such commitments is not always easy even when times are stable, but what about extreme situation, such as the current pandemic? In one of his latest articles Mark Kramer says that coronavirus is putting corporate social responsibility to a test[1]. The purpose of this paper is to find out in what ways different companies are dealing with this test and what are the consequences of their actions for the stakeholders and for the companies themselves. Based on the research of the Responsible Business Forum information resources, an attempt is made to classify corporate strategies in response to the crisis, within the context of corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, social purpose, pandemic

Streszczenie: Niezwykle trudna sytuacja, w której biznes i społeczeństwo znalazły się wiosną 2020 roku, skłania do stawiania pytań o rolę społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu (CSR) w erze COVID-19, jak również w czasie po ustaniu pandemii. Czy konieczne jest zredefiniowanie tej roli, czy też bieżący stan wiedzy w sposób wystarczający tłumaczy rolę CSR w czasach chaosu i kryzysu?
Bardzo wiele firm deklaruje posiadanie misji społecznej i wartości, w które wierzy, nie wspominając troski okazywanej pracownikom i innym interesariuszom. Spełnienie takich zobowiązań nie zawsze jest łatwe, nawet w czasie stabilnym gospodarczo, ale co w przypadku wystąpienia ekstremalnej sytuacji, takiej jak obecna pandemia? W jednym ze swoich najnowszych artykułów Mark Kramer pisze, że koronawirus wystawia na próbę społeczną odpowiedzialność biznesu. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest ustalenie, w jaki sposób różne firmy radzą sobie z tą próbą i jakie są konsekwencje ich działań dla interesariuszy i samych firm. W oparciu o badanie zasobów informacji Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu zostanie również podjęta próba klasyfikacji strategii przedsiębiorstw w odpowiedzi na zaistniały kryzys, w kontekście społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu, misja społeczna, pandemia

Introduction

In the face of the current pandemic the media report many cases of spontaneous actions of individual companies or organized initiatives, where large corporations and small local businesses side by side get involved in aid operations. Thus, companies allocate funds to finance medical and protective equipment, or expand their production lines to enable the production of such equipment. They provide free video content, increase data transfer limits and educate about crisis management. On the other hand, one can hear about mass layoffs effective immediately, as well as about big brands canceling orders, including those that have already been made and delivered, e.g. from

[1] M.R. Kramer, *Coronavirus is putting corporate social responsibility to the test*, "Harvard Business Review", April 1, 2020.

Asia to Europe. It seems that some businesses have failed to consider their obligations to the small companies in their supply chain including those in developing countries, where furlough schemes supported by governments are non-existent and access to health care is precarious[2] (Gutierrez-Huerter, 2020). According to the World Research on Business Integrity 2020 conducted by Ernst & Young[3], 90% of respondents believe that COVID-19 makes it difficult to conduct business in an ethical manner. In addition to the economic downturn, COVID-19 creates additional challenges: fear of the virus itself, insecurity, social distance and the associated social isolation that imprints the psyche. What is expected from business in a pandemic? How to help reasonably, when many react spontaneously but edgily or get lost in an unusual situation?

Interesting statements of experts appear who admit that due to lack of funds, or simply because it "does not fall out" – companies are massively giving up advertising. Communicating about assistance activities is now often the only form of communication activity of companies, so it is not at all surprising that companies are trying to somehow promote their activities in providing support to various groups of stakeholders. At the same time, one can meet the following opinions among image experts: "The premise of CSR is to share your assets, commitment to the good of the community – not necessarily to the benefit of your own brand or company. That is also how it should be treated now – in the face of great social danger"[4]. It seems that this type of reasoning, quite often appearing in the popular perception of CSR, is in clear contradiction to the modern understanding of corporate social responsibility, in which it is rather perceived as the way a company earns money, not how it spends it. While there is nothing wrong with initiating activities that provide real support where it is most needed, they should not necessarily be classified as CSR. The purpose of this article is to identify the ways businesses understand and practice CSR in times of pandemic and what are the consequences of their actions for their stakeholders and for the companies themselves. The information resources of the Responsible Business Forum will be explored in an attempt to classify business strategies in response to the new pandemic reality.

1. Differences in understanding the concept of corporate social responsibility

It is worth starting to consider the essence of the CSR concept by quoting the current definition of corporate social responsibility, formulated by the European Commission in 2011, and comparing it to the previous one, composed in 2001. The

[2] G. Gutierrez-Huerter, *COVID-19 poses new challenges for corporate social responsibility efforts*, King's College London, 6 May 2020, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/.

[3] Global Integrity Report, Ernst and Young, 2020.

[4] B. Goczał, *Firmy CSR-owo wspierają walkę z koronawirusem*, www.wirtualnemedia.pl/.

2001 definition stated: CSR is a concept based on the voluntary inclusion of social goals and environmental protection by companies in their business activities and relations with stakeholders. This activity should go beyond the obligations arising from generally accepted legal norms[5] (EC, 2001) At present, however, corporate social responsibility is understood simply as the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society[6] (EC, 2011). There is no longer any voluntariness mentioned in the definition, that CSR may or may not be an "addition" to the company's core business. It merely states that each company is responsible for its actions. This really applies to every sphere of the company's operations. What specific areas of their business should companies pay attention to, if they want to follow the principles of CSR, is outlined in the most popular standard of social responsibility – ISO 26000. These areas are: organizational governance, human rights, labor practices, environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues, community involvement and development[7] (ISO, 2018). So it turns out that all elements of running a business are important, and every project and every activity of a company can be implemented in accordance with the principles of responsibility, or in conflict with them.

Another milestone outlining the modern standards for corporate responsibility took place in August 2019, when the U.S. Business Roundtable (BRT), a non-profit association composed of corporate CEOs, issued a statement redefining the purpose of a corporation. The BRT's new wording for the definition was working for the benefit of all stakeholders, such as customers, employees, suppliers, communities where the company operates, as well as shareholders. The statement was signed by 181 CEOs (95% of BRT members) following months of consultation. The fact that the leaders of some of the largest companies in the world have come together and agreed to officially support a shift from shareholder primacy towards an explicit consideration of long-term stakeholder interests, is a significant accomplishment. The words of Daren Walker, the President of the Ford Foundation, commenting on the redefinition sound even more emphatic today: "This is tremendous news because it is more critical than ever that businesses in the 21st century are focused on generating long-term value for all stakeholders and addressing the challenges we face, which will result in shared prosperity and sustainability for both business and society"[8] (Business Roudtable, 2019).

[5] Green Paper: Promoting a European framework for Corporate Social Responsibility, Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 18.07.2001.

[6] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions A renewed EU strategy 2011-14 for Corporate Social Responsibility, Brussels, 25.10.2011.

[7] 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility, Discovering ISO 26000, International Organization for Standardization, 2018.

[8] Business Roundtable Redefines the Purpose of a Corporation to Promote 'An Economy That Serves All Americans', Aug 19, 2019, https://www.businessroundtable.org/.

However, there is always the risk that this revolutionary theoretical shift will fail to generate practical results. The problem is very often that some enterprises treat corporate social responsibility instrumentally, using it as an element of company's promotion or diverting attention from the negative effects of its activities, offenses and actions that may have a negative impact on the natural environment or communities. As a result, the very abbreviation CSR raises suspicions because it is attributed to the PR idea. This is especially the case when persons responsible for social activities operate within the organization's marketing and PR teams, and the CSR initiatives they take are one-off actions, not related to the organization's strategy and its core activity.

That is why what seems to be more sustainable is comprehensive, long-term actions to improve the conditions of the environment, and in consequence – create a new market and new business opportunities. These activities may involve, for example, incorporating selected UN Sustainable Development Goals into the organisation's strategy. A report by Deloitte "2030 Purpose: Good business and a better future. Connecting sustainable development with enduring commercial success"[9], describes the commercial success of companies, associated with commitment to sustainable development. The authors of the report encourage companies to transform their business models in such a way that they focus on more sustainable activities - not only to improve overall social well-being, but also to contribute to their very own business success. This is in line with the very idea of the so called shared value.

When the concept of creating value for both business and society came to light in 2007 in the article: "Strategy and society: corporate social responsibility – a useful fashion or a new element of the competitive strategy" by Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer[10], the idea had no name yet. The authors however did present an innovative approach to business and society relations at that time, according to which corporate success and social good are not a zero-sum game. They already pointed out the problem, which in some businesses remains relevant even today: CSR initiatives are so detached from the activities of the organization, that they are not able to use their full potential in combating society's challenges and do not bring breakthrough business benefits.

In their next article published in 2011[11], they discussed in detail the concept of creating shared value (CSV), which caused a lot of stir in the business world. Many leaders began to wonder how this concept differed from the already quite popular CSR idea. Kramer explained that the idea of CSV, in connection with social impact (doing well by doing good), is often mistakenly taken for CSR. "Corporate social responsibility is something different" – explained Kramer at the time[12]. In his opinion, CSR

[9] 2030 Purpose: Good business and a better future Connecting sustainable development with enduring commercial success, Deloitte, January 2017.

[10] M.E. Porter, M.R. Kramer, *Strategy and Society: The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility*, "Harvard Business Review", December 2006

[11] M.E. Porter, M.R. Kramer, *Creating Shared Value*, "Harvard Business Review", January-February 2011.

[12] M. Kramer, *CSR vs CSV – What's the difference?*, Foundation Strategy Group, Feb. 2011.

is widely perceived as a cost, not profit center, while creating shared value involves creating new business opportunities, new markets, which improves profitability and strengthens the company's competitive position. Corporate social responsibility focuses on responsibility, while CSV – on creating value. Business success should go hand in hand with benefits for society – this allows to generate a value significantly greater than just profit, such as introducing innovation, increasing efficiency, supporting the diversity of companies, enabling expansion into new markets, etc. However such strong differentiation in defining CSR and CSV might indicate that is that CSR is about doing something separate from the business and CSV is about integrating social and environmental impact into the business, using that integration to drive economic value. This may mean that CSR notion has been compromised and CSV is the natural "next step". On the other hand there is little in-depth analysis available in academic literature on CSV and a lack of a conceptualized measurement method for this concept[13]. Nevertheless with CSR still remaining the mainstream in defining the social responsibility of business it might seem only reasonable to underline and strengthen its strategic aspects, which brings it closer to the CSV understanding.

2. Social purpose in pandemic times

According to Fink[14] and Vilá and Bharadwaj[15]: "Consumers increasingly expect brands to have not just functional benefits but a social purpose". This means that they are asking companies to respond to broader societal challenges, such as climate change or human rights and demanding that organizations "serve a social purpose". This expectation is placing immense pressure on companies, but it is also creating certain opportunities. Vilá and Bharadwaj[16] point to companies which have integrated social purpose into their business models from the very beginning e. g. Patagonia or TOMS (they are called social purpose natives) and those that have developed without a well defined social purpose and are currently searching for one (social purpose immigrants).

What is worth stressing in face of the contemporary crisis is that companies having a well defined purpose at the same time seem to be more resilient to sudden social and environmental disruptions[17]. This is because they are more experienced in the area of putting people before profits, especially short-term profits, as well as creat-

[13] See: P. Wójcik, *How creating shared value differs from corporate social responsibility*, "Journal of Management and Business Administrations Central Europe, 2016, 24, T.K. Yang, M.R. Yan, *The Corporate Shared Value for Sustainable Development: An Ecosystem*, *Perspective*, Sustainability, MDPI, Open Access Journal, vol. 12(6), March 2020 and K. Dembek, P. Singh, V. Bhakoo, *Literature Review of Shared Value: A Theoretical Concept or a Management Buzzword?*, "Journal of Business Ethics" 2016, Vol. **137**.

[14] L. Fink, "Larry Fink's annual letter to CEOs: A sense of purpose," BlackRock.

[15] O.R. Vilá, S. Bharadwaj, *Competing on Social Purpose*, "Harvard Business Review", September-October, 2017.

[16] Ibidem.

[17] The Coronavirus Era: From Sustainability to Purpose, "Euromonitoir International", June 2020.

ing partnerships, redesigning products and supporting communities. The Euromonitor 2020 report indicates two major avenues followed by corporations in response to COVID-19. One of these has been called a philanthropic response, through which companies are basically donating money and/or products needed during the fight with the coronavirus. For example in recent months, many Polish companies and brands are taking a number of actions to support the fight against the spreading coronavirus. They financially support hospitals, donate products, fund equipment, and organize meals for the medical staff. On the one hand, the reason for this is simply to help in an extremely difficult situation. But also because they are rapidly resigning from advertising as a way of communicating with the customers – because of the financial situation and because in their opinion advertising is currently out of place. So, on the other hand, promoting such activity is natural and understandable from the brand's perspective - other communication has virtually completely ceased. It is important however that brands inform about real activities, and not take action only to be able to show off something. Thanks to such commitment, however, they gain a lot - particularly consumer loyalty and trust in brands increases.

The other reaction has been coined value-added response and is understood as the offering of new forms of shared value. This goes beyond simply donating money or products to those in need. This approach assumes that social activities are inscribed in the company's strategy to co-create environmental conditions to consequently increase sales and profit, for example, by helping their business clients to re-open after lockdown and resume production.

Some businesses are using existing infrastructure to manufacture new products or provide different services that are high in demand. Others are "borrowing" employees made temporarily redundant from those sectors that are most vulnerable to the pandemic. An interesting example is set by Tesco in Poland. By hiring new personnel, Tesco not only supports store teams, facilitates access to products for consumers, but also offers work to those who, during an epidemic, due to restrictions in their activities in some industries, have lost their income sources and cannot continue working in their profession. So far, as many as 650 people have found a temporary job at Tesco, and the retailer does not rule out further recruitments. These employees will help in daily service of stores, deliveries and online orders[18].

There are numerous actions of companies' response to the reality of a pandemic described on the webpage of the Responsible Business Forum, the largest NGO in Poland addressing the concept of corporate social responsibility. All kinds of actions are described together under the heading #businessreactsresponsibly[19]. An attempt to classify examples of such actions, taking into account whether it has been a mere money/product transfer or an action resulting from a more strategic approach, can be found in table 1 below.

[18] www.wiadomoscihandlowe.pl/.
[19] www.odpowiedzialnybiznes.pl/.

Table 1. Philanthropic response to COVID-19 versus value added response
Tabela 1. Reakcja biznesu na COVID-19 o charakterze filantropijnym a reakcja uwzględniająca wartość dodaną

Examples of philanthropic response		**Examples of value added response**	
Name of the company	**Description**	**Name of the company**	**Description**
Provident, Santander Bank Polska, PGE, Enea, ERGO Hestia	Donating money to hospitals to support them in the fight with coronavirus	ING Bank Śląski	In the period of growing interest of companies in moving their activities to the Internet, the bank offers support in the transformation of the sales model allowing companies to quickly start e-commerce activities and develop their business
Ikea, Ingka Centres, PZU, Polpharma, Nestle Polska, Henkel Polska, LPP, Lyreco Polska, Persil,	Funding equipment (hand sanitisers, ventilators, protective face masks and hospital gowns, disinfection devices), cleaning supplies, providing food aid	L'Oréal Polska	Providing hair salons with solutions supporting reopening and help in organizing work in a new reality.
Enea, City Handlowy **(#CitiVolunteers)**	Employee volunteering – helping seniors do shopping, funding meals for paramedics	Airbus BizLab, BASF, Boston Consulting Group, CEMEX, Citi, Endeavor, IDB Lab, IE, IESE Business School, Microsoft for Startups, South Summit, Telefonica	Restarting Together initiative whose goal is to find projects that seek to "expedite the return to normality after the confinement period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic," as well as boost economic recovery in a sustainable way, aimed specially at improving employment, revitalizing the ecosystem of small businesses, and creating networks and financial aid mechanisms for crisis situations,

Source: own elaboration based on resources of the Responsible Business Forum www.odpowiedzialnybiznes.pl/.

While both kinds of actions deserve appreciation and recognition, it is the examples similar to those on the right side of the table that should be the center of attention in context of CSR and CSV. The examples of ING Bank Śląski, L'Oréal Polska and Restarting Together initiative have one thing in common. The companies mentioned do not only build a reputation of good citizens who are attentive to those in need during difficult times, but also actively impact the business environment within which they function. In addition to offering support to their clients they also contribute to their own business wellbeing.

The pandemic forced consumers to quickly and drastically change their shopping habits. Due to security issues, but also because of the availability of this type of shopping, they moved to the Internet. According to ING Bank Śląski data, individual customers made 58% more transactions on the Internet in March 2020 than in the corresponding period of the previous year[20]. Through offering support to their clients in the transformation to e-commerce ING has contributed to the change of their status thus also improving its own financial standing.

There are approximately 28,000 hair salons in Poland, of which approximately 7 thousand cooperate with L'Oréal Polska. L'Oréal launched a package of activities that help hair salons re-open. In addition to supplying protective materials, the company provides salons with solutions supporting return to work and ensuring the safety of clients and salon employees. In recent weeks, L'Oréal Polska has actively supported the Polish Association of the Cosmetics Industry in creating guidelines for the safe operation of hair salons after re-opening and participated in consultations of the final text of the document with the government[21].

The Restarting Together initiative aims to promote projects developed by entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises that "will contribute both to speed up economic recovery after the effects of the pandemic, and create a more resilient society, with more effective and sustainable capabilities against future similar crises"[22]. This global challenge assumes that international business leaders work together with business schools and associations to find innovative projects that can accelerate recovery from the downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and promote community involvement in order to build a better future for societies. Although it is too early to assess the effects of the initiative, the idea to support entrepreneurial ideas by established businesses seems innovative and creates the kind of interdependent economic environment that perhaps is missing today.

While the organizers offer participants their experience and knowledge in various areas, as well as the opportunity to build relationships with leading international companies and provide access to investment capital they expect the participating

[20] Ibidem.
[21] Ibidem
[22] www.restartingtogether.com/.

start-ups to come up with long-term initiatives, viable to be quickly implemented (up to 6 months), with tangible social impact on the communities and economic benefits. Through initiatives like Restarting Together it is visible how corporations are redefining their relationship with the entrepreneurial ecosystems,

Conclusions

The contemporary crisis is forcing organizations to redefine many aspects of their operations and social responsibility is also becoming subject to such a process. Taking a step back and devising more thoughtful and innovative business models that help to contain and deal with the virus outbreak may yield more sustainable outcomes. As the world starts to adapt to the new reality, businesses will be shifting from reactive to more proactive responses to the crisis. He and Harris[23] (2020) present an optimistic view, that the crisis situation faced today will accelerate post-pandemic CSR development in the long run, as more and more businesses realize that their long-term survival and development hinges on achieving a certain kind of balance between profitability and harmony with its various stakeholders. So the dilemma facing organizations will be how to invest in CSR to achieve mutually beneficial social, environmental and economic goals, rather than whether to invest at all.

The presented two types of companies' reactions to the new economic reality brought by the crises does not exhaust the entire repertoire of possible responses, but does indicate the paths likely to follow, being classified as "responsible". It seems important to be able to differentiate which of them are only short-term supportive measures, and which can be recognized as truly strategic, integrating the impact of the external environment and using it to drive economic value.

Following the United Nation's call for efforts[24] (UN, 2020) to build more inclusive and sustainable post Covid-19 economies, being more resilient in facing global challenges, such as pandemics, climate changes, and others, instead of going back to the world as it was before, businesses face an opportunity to rethink their strategies in the way that they take social interests and environmental protection into account at the stage of building a strategy.

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[23] K. He, L. Harris, *The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on corporate social responsibility and marketing philosophy*, "Journal of Business Research", Published online 2020, May 21.

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