

From Sustainability coercion to Social Engagement: the turning role of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

As widely recognized, sustainability is a multi- and trans-disciplinary domain potentially able to influence actions, decisions, and behaviors at all the levels of socio-economic organizations. Reflecting upon the pervasive nature of sustainability domain, the paper proposes an overview about the evolutionary path of strategies and approaches for sustainability. Adopting a deductive approach, the main purpose of the paper is to underline in which ways the shifting from a coercive approach to a participatory approach in strategies for sustainability – made possible by the spread of Corporate Social Responsibility practices – has contributed to the emergence of sustainable innovation domain. The concept of Social Engagement in sustainability debate is proposed with the aim to underline that sustainable innovation is effectively possible only in the case in which all the levels of socio-economic organizations are engaged in the debate about sustainability and – as a consequence – they are effectively able to understand and promote the value of an innovation able to combine and satisfy society, economy, and environment needs.

Key words: Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, Social Engagement, Sustainable Innovation, Evolutionary path.

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Sommario

Dalla coercizione per la sostenibilità all'impegno sociale: il ruolo della responsabilità sociale d'impresa

Come ampiamente riconosciuto, la sostenibilità è un dominio multi e transdisciplinare potenzialmente in grado di influenzare azioni, decisioni e comportamenti a tutti i livelli delle organizzazioni socioeconomiche. Riflettendo sulla natura pervasiva del dominio della sostenibilità, il documento propone una panoramica sul percorso evolutivo delle strategie e degli approcci per la sostenibilità. Adottando un approccio deduttivo, lo scopo principale del lavoro è di sottolineare in che modo il passaggio da un approccio coercitivo ad un approccio partecipativo nelle strategie per la sostenibilità – reso possibile dalla diffusione delle pratiche di Responsabilità Sociale d'Impresa – ha contribuito all'emergere del dominio dell'innovazione sostenibile. Il concetto di Social Engagement è proposto per arricchire il dibattito in corso sulla sostenibilità al fine di sottolineare che l'innovazione sostenibile è possibile solo nel caso in cui tutti i livelli delle organizzazioni socioeconomiche sono impegnati nel dibattito sulla sostenibilità e – di conseguenza – sono in grado di comprendere e promuovere efficacemente il valore di un'innovazione in grado di coniugare e soddisfare i bisogni della società, dell'economia e dell'ambiente.

Parole chiave: Sostenibilità, Responsabilità Sociale di Impresa, Impegno sociale, Innovazione Sostenibile, Percorso evolutivo.

1. Preliminary reflections

In the last decades, managerial, and business studies have progressively underlined the need for defining innovative business models able to overcome a view strictly based on profit generation in order to better harmonize the multiple needs related to the contamination among society, economy, and environment (Bocken *et al.*, 2014; Carayannis *et al.*, 2015; Saviano *et al.*, 2017; Laasch *et al.*, 2018; Singh *et al.*, 2020).

Consolidated business theories interested in identifying processes able to only maximize profit generation have been progressively marginalized with the aim to provide more attention to processes and paths able to depict business configurations inclusive of the multiple social and economic dynamics to which companies is part (Biloslavo *et al.*, 2020).

This ongoing change in perspective have a long history (Doppelt, 2017) that is nowadays well summarized under the conceptual umbrella of sustainability science as articulated domain interested in analyzing and depicting balance conditions among needs and expectations of society, economy, and environment domains (Kates *et al.*, 2001; Clark & Dickson, 2003; Kates,

2011). Over the time, multiple contributions have been provided in order to explicit evidences about the possibility to combine decisions, actions, and behaviors of economy, society, and environment domains in order to ensure a mutual satisfaction and a long-time survival of all socio-economic systems (Giddings *et al.*, 2002; Gowdy, 2013).

Despite all these contributions, available literature on the topic seems to be mainly interested in providing possible conceptual frameworks through which explain how society, economy, and environment should interact (Veliyath & Fitzgerald, 2000) or to provide tangible evidences about risks and opportunities for companies in promoting sustainability-based activities (Tilley *et al.*, 2003; Feste *et al.*, 2020). Notwithstanding these approaches have contributed to enrich current knowledge about the domain of sustainability and its multiple implications, they seem to not adequately consider turbulent changes of socio-economic systems (Qiu *et al.*, 2020; Alvino *et al.*, 2020; Chaurasia *et al.*, 2020) and to explain antecedents and approaches for supporting the so-called sustainable innovations (Larson, 2000).

In such a vein, the sustainability is a field for reflections about contamination and co-existence among multiple perspectives that cannot be approached through the definition of representative models. This approach is the result of a reductionist view interested in describing what are the parts of a phenomenon more than in understanding in which ways relations and interactions among the parts contribute to generate the phenomenon and the ways in which it is perceived.

As a result, a relevant gap in knowledge emerges with reference to the ways in which sustainability can effectively provide sharable guidelines able to influence decisions and behaviors of socio-economic systems and the following research question requires to be investigated: In which ways the increasing attention in sustainable behaviors can promote sustainable innovations? In order to bridge this gap in knowledge, the paper investigates main elements of sustainability orientation and the potential role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a way for supporting companies in promoting sustainability-based behaviors and innovations. After this, the concept of Social Engagement is provided in order to underline that the path towards a shared sustainability behavior is facing a turning point. Indeed, strategies inspired by CSR logic have underlined that top-down approaches direct to definite guidelines for promoting sustainability-based decisions and behaviors cannot produce more results. A new approach is required in which the focus is on the bottom-up involvement and participation.

According to the traced flow, the rest of paper is structured as follow: the section 2 will provide a brief overview of theoretical background upon which

reflections herein are based and in the section 3 the concept of Social Engagement is proposed as a way for supporting the shift from top-down to bottom-up approach in sustainability path and for made possible sustainable innovations. Finally, the section 3 will report main theoretical and managerial implications of proposed reflections and 4 will summarize main contributions of the reflections herein and it will propose possible future directions for the research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 *The challenges of Sustainability*

The challenging debate around the domain of Sustainability has a long history (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2001; Young & Tilley, 2006). Preliminary contributions in this field have been provided by studies interested in the relationships between human and nature (Jamieson, 1998). These contributions have defined the so-called “environmental disclosure” (Giovannoni & Fabietti, 2013) of which the first international manifestation can be identified in the UN Conference on Human Environment of 1972 during which it has been stated that “the capacity of the Earth to produce vital renewable resources must be maintained and, wherever practicable, restored or improved” (UN 1972: 4).

Over the time, the interest in the Sustainability domain has progressively involved also the society (Waltner-Toews *et al.*, 2008 Miska *et al.*, 2018) and the economy (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2002; Boar *et al.*, 2020) and a first attempt of conceptual model has been provided by John Elkington with the *Triple Bottom Line* (Elkington, 1998) as a way for supporting companies in including social and environmental performance in their strategies and behaviors and by Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff with the *Triple-helix model* (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995) interested in depicting the key role of interactions among Academia, Industry, and Government for promoting a sustainable development. Building upon these models, more other representations – such as the Triple Helix twins (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2006), the Quadruple and Quintuple Helix (Carayannis & Campbell, 2010), and the Helix of sustainability (Scalia *et al.*, 2018) – have been provided in order to support researchers and practitioners in understanding the multiple dynamics with reference to which the sustainability can show its relevance.

Analyzing all these models, it clearly emerges the willingness to underline that the sustainability is a multi-dimensional domain with reference to which it is needed to ensure the collaboration among multiple actors and perspectives. For supporting this collaboration multiple national and international activities have been promoted with the aim to define a common set of

rules and guidelines able to stimulate collaborative sustainable behaviors. In the first phase of “international regulation” the challenge of sustainability has been faced adopting a reward-punishment mechanism (Cai & Choi, 2019; Chen & Akmalul’Ulya, 2019) while in recent years a collaborative based approach has been progressively promoting through the definition of the Millennium Development Goals derived from the United Nations Millennium Declaration signed in September 2000 by 191 UN member states (Sachs & McArthur, 2005) and through the definition of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sachs, 2012).

Thanks to these relevant sets of shared aims the trace towards the sustainability has officially changed its direction and all the UN members have recognized the need for adopting a participatory approach more than a coercive approach (Griggs *et al.*, 2013). Obviously, this change can be referred to the meta-level of socio-economic organizations and it mainly involves Nations and International Organizations, but a similar approach can be identified with reference to the micro-level of socio-economic organizations composed by companies and individuals (Caputo *et al.*, 2018). In this latter case the change in perspective has been possible thanks to the increasing attention around the domain of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as detailed in the following section.

2.2 *The Corporate Social Responsibility*

First conceptualizations related to the domain of CSR have been proposed at the beginning of 20th century (Barnard, 1938) and only in the 1950s this domain has attracted the interest of researchers and practitioners from multiple research areas (Gangi *et al.*, 2019). Analyzing consolidated literature about CSR it is possible to note that multiple approaches have been followed over the time (Jones, 1980; Carroll, 1999; McWilliams *et al.*, 2006). With reference to the point, Carroll (1999) has identified five main historical phases in the evolutionary path of CSR:

- 1) *The modern era of social responsibility begins: the 1950s* in which pioneer authors have underlined the need for rethinking companies behaviors and business models;
- 2) *CSR literature expands: the 1960s* in which multiple contributions have been provided with the aim to define the CSR and its “field of interests” (Davis, 1960);
- 3) *Definitions of CSR proliferate: the 1970s* during which the CSR domain

has acquired a multidimensional meaning because researchers from multiple knowledge have underlined the need for adopting multi- and trans-disciplinary models and representations;

- 4) *The 1980s: fewer definitions, more research, and alternative theme*, during which the focus of researchers and practitioners interested in CSR domain has been related to its implications more than to its conceptual development;
- 5) *The 1990s: CSR further yields to alternative themes*, in which the role of CSR as key elements for business strategies have been definitely recognized.

With the aim to extend and update the evolutionary path of CSR, Caputo (2020) has proposed two other phases:

- 1) *The 2000s: the emerging market of CSR*, during which CSR has been approached as a possible driver for companies' communication in order to promote companies' alignment to market expectations;
- 2) *The 2010s: the era of regulation*, in which multiple normative actions have been promoted in order to ensure a shared approach to CSR and to maximize its contribution in ensuring sustainable companies' behaviors also through the definition of guidelines and suggestions for measuring and evaluating environmental, social, and governance performance in the light of the sustainable development (Miralles-Quirós *et al.*, 2018).

The proposed brief historical overview offers the possibility for understanding the pervasive nature of CSR and for underling how it is strongly based on the promotion of a participatory and democratic approach in which the definition of sustainable strategies and behaviors depend by the effective participation of all the levels that compose a socio-economic organization (Devinney, 2009; Stanaland *et al.*, 2011). According to the point, the CSR can be considered as the turning point through which companies have shifted to be considered as passive actors that must respect top-down defined guidelines and rules to become active actors able to contribute to the definition of renovate approaches for promoting sustainable strategies and behaviors.

3. From guidelines definition to social engagement: how the sustainable innovation emerges?

As briefly summarized in previous sections, the “trace” towards the Sustainability have been approached through different strategies over the time. Basically, reflections and interests around the sustainability began with the adoption of a coercive approach through which influence companies' and citizens' behaviors in order to promote a suitable development for all (Ashford,

2005). This initial approach was inspired by the punishment-rewards logic and it has contributed – in the first part of 20th century – to achieve relevant purposes inspired by the sustainability (Caradonna, 2014). Anyways, over the time the initial approach has showed an increasing incapability to involve all the multiple actors interested by the debate about the sustainability (Grober & Cunningham, 2012; Cillo *et al.*, 2020). Since the second half of 20th century, the coercive approach has been progressively questioned as a consequence of its incapability in promoting the active participation of the levels (individual, local communities and organizations) at the bottom of socio-economic systems (Barr, 2012). For overcoming this weakness, a change in perspective have been progressively supported in order to promote the shift from a top-down imposition to a bottom-up participation in sustainability dynamics (Gao, Zhang, 2006). The turning point in the trace towards the sustainability could be identified in the definition and sharing of CSR practices as a general domain thanks to which companies and organizations have been widen involved in the definition of sustainability paths and proposes through the adoption of voluntary and self-managed activities (Wiek *et al.*, 2012). This change in perspective has offered to companies and organizations the possibility to act as “promoters” for sustainability also using its main drivers as a way for building competitive strategies based on distinctive images (Del Giudice *et al.*, 2017).

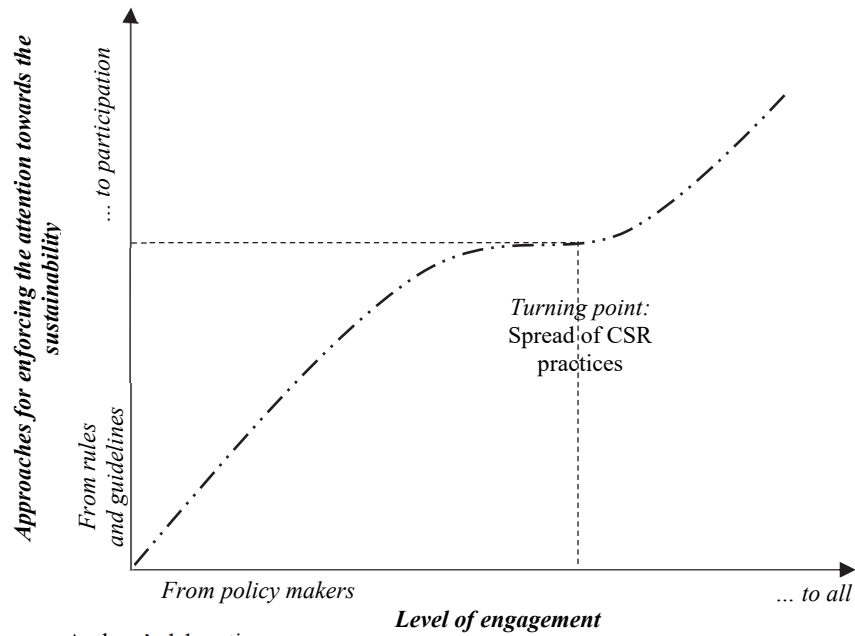
Acting in this direction, companies and organizations have progressively underlined the relevance of sustainability (Eccles *et al.*, 2012; Johnson *et al.*, 2018). As a consequence, consumers and society are progressively embracing the pillars of sustainability and they are including them in their cognitive domains as key elements through which evaluate socio-economic performance (Gray *et al.*, 2010; Caputo *et al.*, 2018).

A virtuous path seems to emerge in which the approaches to sustainability are shifting from the top-down definition of guidelines and rules to the bottom-up participation and social engagement as simplified in the following Figure 1.

The evolutionary path reported in Figure 1 can be better analyzed focusing the attention on its phases. Accordingly, it is possible to state that the change in the approaches toward the sustainability has been characterized by two main variables:

- *Effectiveness of promoted actions*, in terms of capability in influencing economy’ and society’ behaviors for supporting the adoption of sustainability-based lifestyles.
- *Level of engagement at all the levels of socio-economic organizations*, in terms of effectively participations and engagement of all socio-economic levels in the definition and adoption of sustainability-based practices and behaviors.

Figure 1 – A possible representation of evolutionary path in the process for promoting attention in the sustainability domain



Source: Authors' elaboration

Combining these two variables it is possible to define four different approaches as summarized in the following Table 1:

- *No Interest – No strategies.* In such a configuration the topic of sustainability is completely underestimated then there are no interests in promoting strategies for the definition of sustainability-based approaches and strategies. This scenario well summarizes the attention towards the sustainability until the first decades of 20th century.
- *Coercive approach.* In such a configuration, policy makers are highly engaged in the definition of sustainability-based guidelines and practices and they try to influence socio-economic organizations' behaviors and strategies through the reward-punishment logic. This scenario well summarizes the attention towards the sustainability in the period from the first decades of 20th century to the 1950s.
- *Collaborative approach.* Such a configuration emerges after the turning point identified in Figure 1. Thanks to the adoption and spread of CSR practices, companies and socio-economic organizations have increased

- their attention in sustainability domain and they have pushed sustainability drives in everyone life. This scenario well summarizes the attention towards the sustainability in the period from the 1950s to the 2000s.
- *Social Engagement*. In such a configuration sustainability debate has definitively engaged all the levels of socio-economic organizations. Attention towards sustainability is not more related to the definition of guidelines and rules but it depends more by citizens' attention and expectations. This scenario well summarize nowadays configuration and it provides a new relevant role to the bottom of pyramid (Prahalad, 2005) in influencing socio-economic strategies and behaviors in the long term. Only in this latter scenario it is possible to image a real sustainable innovation as “the development of new products, processes, services and technologies that contribute to the development and well-being of human needs and institutions while respecting natural resources and regeneration capacities” (Tello & Yoon, 2008, p. 165).

Table 1 – A possible overview of main orientations in the changing approaches towards sustainability

Effectiveness of promoted actions	<i>High</i>	<i>Coercive approach</i> Top-down definition of guidelines and rules	<i>Social Engagement</i>
	<i>Low</i>	<i>No Interests – No Strategies</i>	<i>Collaborative approach</i> Promotion and implementation of CSR practices
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
Level of engagement at all the levels of socio-economic organizations			

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Reflecting upon the four-scenarios reported in Table 1, it is possible to state that only in the social engagement configuration it is possible to really face the challenges of sustainable innovation because only in the case in

which all the levels of socio-economic organizations are effectively engaged in the trace towards the sustainability they can really appreciate and enhance the value of an innovation able to satisfy society, economy, and environment needs ensuring – at the same time – a sustainable development for all (Cillo *et al.*, 2019; Orlando *et al.*, 2020).

According to the reflections upon which four scenarios reported in Table 1 have been developed, it clearly emerges the need for promoting a sustainable based culture thanks to which address companies' and organizations' decisions towards “sustainable horizons”. In such a direction, the domain of sustainable innovations can be considered as the “tangible evidence” of a strong and rooted awareness about the relevance of sustainability principles in cognitive frameworks of companies' and organizations' decision makers. More than this, it is possible to consider the sustainable innovation as a way through which companies' and organizations' decision makers can influence market and social development with the aim to combine subjective performances and collective wellness (Polese *et al.*, 2018; Del Giudice *et al.*, 2019).

Four scenarios summarized in Table 1 represent a possible framework through which companies and organizations have the possibility for reading socio-economic dynamics in order to understand which strategies should be developed in order to ensure an effective combination between subjective interests and collective purposes. Specifically, the Table 1 emphasis which conditions should exist in order to make sustainable innovation a suitable path for companies. As previously underlined, sustainable innovation can be considered as an affordable path for companies and organizations only in the case in which there is a high level of engagement at all the levels of socio-economic organizations. Without this condition, sustainable innovations cannot be considered as a purpose effectively actionable by companies and organizations because they could potentially not be accepted and understood by socio-economic actors with several negative effects of companies' and organizations' possibilities for survival.

4. Theoretical and managerial implications

The debate around the challenges of sustainability has progressively engaged all the socio-economic levels. In order to enrich ongoing conceptual reflections about strategies and approaches for promoting the collective interest in sustainability domain, the paper provides an overview about conditions and processes through which sustainable innovations could become an affordable path for companies and organizations interested in combining subjective interests and collective purposes (Polese *et al.*, 2018).

Thanks to the adoption of a deductive approach, the paper identifies four possible scenarios through which it is possible to summarize main approaches to sustainability. Such a framework could represent a useful tool for companies and organizations interested in understanding which approach to sustainability is effectively affordable as a consequence of socio-economic composition and configuration. Basically, the matrix suggests to companies and organizations the main direction through which promote sustainability-based actions and behaviors and it defines basic conditions that should exist in socio-economic configurations in order to make sustainable innovation an affordable path.

Stressing managerial implications related to the conceptual reflections herein, it is possible to state that the paper also underlines the need for increasing current attention on sustainability-based culture. As previously underlined, sustainable innovations can be considered as a “tangible evidence” of strong attention and interest of decision makers in sustainable development. According to this, companies should build a strong internal sustainable awareness before evaluating advantages and risks related to sustainable innovations.

From a different point of view, the paper also provides multiple theoretical implications mainly related to the need for widening perspectives in the study of elements and conditions required for sustainable development (Iandolo *et al.*, 2018). According to this, the paper underlines that all the approached concepts - sustainability development, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable innovation – cannot be really analyzed without considering the socio-economic configuration in which companies and organizations exist. In such a direction, the paper provides preliminary building blocks on which reflect in order to define multi- and trans-disciplinary frameworks able to depict the multiple socio-economic interactions able to influence the possibility for sustainability innovations and development.

5. Conclusions and future directions for research

For a long time the topic of innovation has been approached mainly focusing the attention of the potential advantages than new products, processes, and activities are able to provide in terms of time optimization and cost effectiveness (Oke, 2007; Trott, 2008; Scuotto *et al.*, 2017; Papa *et al.*, 2018; Caputo *et al.*, 2019). This debate has been recently extended and a new relevant concept has been included: the *sustainable innovation* (McElroy, 2003; Nill & Kemp, 2009).

As well summarized by current literature, sustainable innovation refers to all the innovation that are able to recognize and satisfy society, economy,

and environment needs without compromising opportunities for future generations to satisfy their needs (Foxon & Pearson, 2008; Geels *et al.*, 2008).

Reflecting upon this wide concept, the paper tries to investigate if current approaches and interests in sustainability domain are effectively ripe for facing the challenges of so-called sustainable innovation. Analyzing main phases of the evolutionary path in the approaches and strategies for sustainability, it has been underlined that the topic of sustainable innovation can be effectively approached and made possible only in the case in which an extended engagement and participation in sustainability debated is ensured.

Accordingly, the concept of Social Engagement in sustainability domain has been proposed as the result of a possible recent changes in perspective in strategies and approaches for sustainability. Basically, the paper underlines how thanks to the adoption and spread of CSR practices the domain of sustainability has progressively extended the number of active contributors defining a social engagement configuration within which sustainable innovations make effectively possible (Caputo & Evangelista, 2018).

Thanks to the reflections herein the paper contributes to the current knowledge about sustainable innovation providing a conceptual framework able to explain reasons for which we are living in the decades in which sustainable innovations are made possible. Before the social engagement configuration, it was not possible to focus the attention on sustainable innovation because citizens and societies were not really interested in sustainability domain and – as a consequence – they were not really able to catch the advantages and values that an innovation able to combine society, economy, and environment expectations can provide in terms of sustainable development for all.

In line to its conceptual nature, the paper only provides possible building blocks on which reflect also for identifying case studies and examples able to test the validity of the proposed representation about the evolutionary path in strategies and approaches for sustainability and the role of its latter configuration in supporting acceptance and spread of sustainable innovations.

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