

Empirical Research Paper

Corporate social responsibility as a strategic narrative: The cases of UK project-based organisations

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ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a strategic narrative that has continuously gained attention from policy makers, practitioners and academics over the last few decades. However, there are limited project management studies which specifically explore CSR-related policy and strategic narrative, and a process of translating it into project-based organisations and their projects. This research study contributes to the existing project management studies by providing insights into the ways project-based organisations formalise and communicate CSR-related narratives and show initiatives and actions in response to wider policy agenda. Through an in-depth analysis of three case studies, we show the ways CSR narratives have been (re)constructed and they ways organisations socially construct their identities as socially responsible. The policy agenda is translated into narratives of corporate responsibility, commitments and actions demonstrated by project-based organisations. Project-based organisations are active players in committing to achieving policy agenda and delivering projects that address and promote CSR.

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a socially constructed strategic narrative in project-based organisations driven by the policy at the macro-level. ISO 26000 Guidance on Social Responsibility is an initiative of the International Organization for Standardization (IOS). ISO 26000 includes the seven core subjects: organisational governance, human rights, labour practices, the environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues and community involvement and development. The UN Global Compact is a global policy initiative for businesses including ten general principles for corporate work with social responsibility. The principles build on internationally acknowledged conventions within four areas: human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption. Project-based organisations which are actively engaged on CSR quite often are criticised on their inability to align CSR initiatives with the macro-level narrative adopted at the policy level. Project studies have started to recognise that wider sustainability agenda becomes translated into project-based organisations and their projects resulting in CSR-related initiatives and strategies (Barendsen et al., 2021; Jiang and Wong, 2016). Yet there are limited project management studies which specifically explore CSR-related policy and strategic narrative and a process of translating it into project-based

organisations and their projects. This study explores how project-based organisations address the macro-level rhetoric of CSR, currently under-explored in the project management literature.

The project-based sector provides a particularly rich setting in which to explore narratives of CSR. The construction sector is project-based and can be viewed as a complex system in which there are many interconnected elements (Miozzo and Dewick, 2002). In this context, large project-based organisations play a mediating, system integrator, role in the interface between the owners and the suppliers who deliver projects (Winch, 2014). Project-based construction organisations are directly related with the narratives of CSR given their substantial environmental impact deriving from the very nature of their projects (Loosemore and Teck Heng Lim, 2017, 2018; Petrovic-Lazarevic, 2008). The UK legislation mandates for every publicly listed organisation to provide a report on ethical, social and environmental risks in its annual report (Porter and Kramer, 2006). Therefore, the society sets high expectations on project-based organisations' social responsibility and along with the increased number of regulations, CSR has to be among the top topics on organisations' agenda nowadays. Project-based construction sector organisations work on small and large scales projects where narrative of CSR is part of the grand narrative of sustainable development (Lin et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2021).

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This study is based on the empirical evidence from three case studies of UK project-based organisations, exploring the ways they promote and formalise CSR strategies and initiatives. We studied three large project-based construction sector organisations that deliver construction projects (e.g. buildings, railways infrastructure, power supply systems) and provide consulting services (e.g. advising construction sector clients on business strategy, management, marketing, supplier collaboration).

The paper starts by reviewing different perspectives on CSR in mainstream management and project studies. The selected methodological stance and research methods are then justified, followed by the presentations of case studies. The findings are discussed in relation to the reviewed literature. The paper finishes by summarising key conclusions derived from the empirical evidence and outlining implications for practice.

2. Theoretical perspectives on corporate social responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is one of the commonly accepted narratives that gained increasingly received attention over the last few decades. Although CSR has been attributed with plenty of different definitions based on different frameworks, a common ground has been found on three pillars: social, economic and environmental (Carroll, 1991) or the so called “triple bottom line” (Elkington, 2004). A firm’s CSR activities could be either internal, focusing on human resources, health and safety, governance or external, emphasising on local communities’ projects, human rights, the supply chain and environmental issues (*Green paper: Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility*, 2001). It is commonly understood that CSR engagement depends on manager’s incentives and constraints which in turn are determined by their ethical beliefs, goals, preferences or contracts (Reinhardt et al., 2008). The narrative of CSR has been inevitably evolved over time.

2.1. Behavioural economics perspective on CSR

In much of the literature, CSR seems to be appeared in two distinct forms: as associated with not-for-profit or philanthropic investments and as a part of the main business activity (Siegel and Vitaliano, 2007; Wood, 1991). The first form seems to serve purposes such as strategic marketing and brand-name differentiation (Girod and Michael, 2003), while the latter is related to cost-reductions, risk mitigation, value creation, employee commitment, regulatory compliance, all of which could lead to an increase in financial performance and profitability (Jones et al., 2006). The prevailing question among researchers is why CSR narrative has gained such a momentum in the past few decades, and to what extent it contributes to the welfare of society, beyond the leverage of profit (Wood, 1991). From a public point of view, CSR has started to change people’s perspective on corporates, as a significant amount of surveys point out that it could act as a point of reference on companies’ brand names when people get to choose between products or services (Ernst and Young, 2002). Academic research has recently turned into exploring why CSR exists, what are the main drivers, the scope, the benefits to the society through different concepts - pure economic (Friedman, 1970), non-economic (Wood, 1991), behavioural and information economics (Kitzmüller and Shimshack, 2012), and marketing (Kotler and Lee, 2004). A significant number of academics present CSR as part of the concepts of “business ethics” or “corporate ethics” (Roberts, 2003) which is a social science perspective in the literature of management. This literature generally suggests that high-level executives could indeed adopt CSR-related strategies at the expense of profit (Jensen, 2002) as an alternative to the most classic assumption that all business-level activities are only associated with profit-maximisation (Friedman, 1970). Such initiatives are aligned with the ethical behaviour of executives who genuinely prefer to sacrifice their profits for the greater good of the society by using their companies as a direct channel of such investments (Wood, 1991).

2.2. CSR drivers and incentives

There has been a number of studies exploring CSR drivers and incentives. For example, Ernst and Young (2002) conducted a survey of almost 150 global companies and identified five major drivers of CSR for businesses: the greater social awareness of corporate ethical, social and environmental behaviour, direct shareholder’s pressures, stakeholder and peer pressure as well as the general increased sense of social responsibility. Given those key drivers, the incentives of executives responsible for CSR strategies will inevitably be either intrinsic or extrinsic, as a wider classification. However, when it comes to incentives, CSR can have many dimensions, most of which are identified through empirical research. In an effort to explore motivations behind CSR, some researchers have linked CSR with particular types of them being either monetary, non-monetary, or in narrative form (Duff, 2016). Kitzmüller and Shimshack (2012) define CSR as “strategic, non-for-profit, or the result of moral hazard” based on the preferences of shareholders and stakeholders and analysed its mechanisms through the concepts of “markets, politics and social norms”. In particular, they suggest that those preferences play a crucial role in crafting CSR motivations along with their different mechanisms. Behavioural economists argue that people’s decisions could be affected by non-monetary motivations in the workplace as well as their daily life. Prior researchers have already linked CSR activities with the principals of behavioural economics and especially how CSR could alter classical labour market outcomes or act as a solution to problems such as moral hazard, principal agent issues (Simon, 1991).

2.3. Performative narrative of CSR

The literature on Corporate Social Performance has recognised the contested nature of narratives about CSR and the dynamism of socially constructed phenomena (Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016). Drawing from the “linguistic turn”, Humphreys and Brown (2008) analyses three narratives regarding CSR told by members of bank: “idealism and altruism”, “economics and expedience” and “ignorance and cynicism”. It is demonstrated how CSR team was engaged in political struggle to persuade individuals to incorporate CSR issues into their ongoing understandings of work selves and the identity of the bank.

Drawing from the work of Czarniawska (2004, 2016) and Vaara et al. (2016), a narrative is defined as a unique discursive construction that embodies unity of purpose, a degree of coherence together with connotations of performative intent. Narratives of CSR are often spoken, but there are other forms of narratives such as textual and symbolic/visual (Vaara et al., 2016). These are often reproduced on policies and reports, corporate websites, or in other externally-facing marketing material. Narratives play critical roles at a sectoral level and at the level of the firm. Narratives of CSR can be seen to carry important messages about organisational vision, directions and strategies. Performative narratives of CSR can be seen as strategies promoted in project-based organisations. Senior managers play an active role in the construction of narratives, as they are responsible for formulating and disseminating an organisational vision and strategies. It is through narratives of CSR that organisations construct their identities as “sustainable” (authors, 2021; Vaara et al., 2016).

3. CSR as a strategic narrative in project-based organisations

Some recent project management studies have focused on social responsibilities of projects and megaprojects as part of sustainable development agenda (Lin et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2021; Magano et al., 2021). There is hence an emerging recognition in project studies that macro-level agenda and narratives of sustainable development translates into projects and their project management in the form of aligned narratives of social responsibilities. Yet there is still lack of insightful understanding of this translating process.

The interaction of the project-based sector with the society should be seen as a “two-way” interactive process. Project-based organisations strive to respond to the narratives promoted at sector level. Among the most important ones in the construction sector are those related to “health and safety, human resources, management of the supply chain, customers and communities and governance and ethics” (Jones et al., 2006: 134). Most of the project-based organisations are following certain mitigation strategies, all of which are highly related with the concept of CSR. Petrovic-Lazarevic (2008) argue that CSR in the construction sector includes the following activities: moral obligation to be a good citizen, sustainability, reputation, relationship with employees and unions, relationship with suppliers and community representatives, and commitment to reporting on CSR. Based on interviews conducted by Petrovic-Lazarevic (2008) with members of boards of directors, suppliers, employees and customers and community representatives, in order to be recognised as a socially responsible business, the corporations should apply a corporate governance structure that takes into consideration working environment concerns, improve their sustainability, occupational health and safety measures, relationships with suppliers and commitment to local community protection and engagement. It is identified that CSR reporting of the construction project-based organisations presents the referenced issues, and most of CSR activities are driven either by regulations related with those topics or internal strategies in an attempt to overpass them. Some of the basic strategies involve health and safety measures, employee training, suppliers and contractors environmental and financial “screening”-partnerships-assessments, risk assessments, compliance, active engagement with the society (i.e. cooperation with local communities, job creation, employment of local suppliers).

Considering the fact that project-based sectors employ millions of people, those issues are inevitably reflected in society at large. Even though project-based sector organisations follow a CSR agenda, there is not an international agreement on CSR fulfilment for the sectors as a whole (Jiang and Wong, 2016). For example, Liu et al. (2011) argue in the language of business, “social investing” is desirable for building up “social capital” which contributes to improved economic/organisational performance. They suggest that if value-driven narratives such as sustainable construction are supported by a sense of CSR it is uncertain whether building projects would give high priority to sustainable construction goals. Loosemore and Teck Heng Lim (2017) argue that the link CSR with economics performance is far from being comprehensive, empirically demonstrating CSR in Australian construction takes place within an integrative conceptual framework. The construction sector appears to be operating in a low state of CSR maturity; with the supply chain practices appear to be primitive. Loosemore and Teck Heng Lim (2018) further reinforce that there is a need to adapt current models of CSR practice, developed in a permanent business context, to reflect project-based nature of construction.

Based on the “New public contract regulations 2015”, the criteria in selection and awarding contracts in the UK have changed, focusing on more sustainable practices through both the construction process per se and the project-based organisation’s operational activities (Public procurement: The public contract regulations 2015). The regulations suggest a new guideline for the project-based organisations award which focuses 70% on quality and 30% on the cost for each project (before: 50% on quality and 50% on the cost). In order for a project-based organisation to stay competitive in the UK market means that its activities should not focus only around the triple bottom line of time, cost and quality over projects, but rather to be able to meet certain social expectations and promote a socially responsible strategy (Jones et al., 2006) using the same frameworks that guide their core business choices. In fact, the programme of a project-based organisation’s CSR activities could be used as a “screening” mechanism that would attract morally motivated principals (Brekke et al., 2003) and at the same time acting as a source of opportunity, innovation and competitive advantage (Porter and Kramer, 2006). Considering the fact that project-based sectors is

inevitably correlated with the concept of CSR – due to the direct links between projects and the society/environment – and the mentioned guidelines.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Methodological stance

This study borrows ideas from narratology in order to examine the ways in which CSR strategic narratives are formed and formalised in the context of UK construction project-based organisations. Narrative inquiry refers to a subset of qualitative research designs in which narratives are understood as linguistic composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed plot (Polkinghorne, 1995). A plot is seen as a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual and organizational events and experiences can be displayed. Narrative inquiry uses data in the form of reports, documents, conversations, interviews, pictures, video and other symbols as the unit of analysis to research the way people create meaning (Czarniawska, 2004). The main method in narrative data is interviewing techniques which allow the narrator to talk about phenomena under investigation (Riessman, 2008). Narrative interviews are likely to encourage interviewees to talk about CSR with the reference to the contexts within which narratives are constructed (Söderberg, 2006).

4.2. Research design

The research deploys a multiple-case study research approach, seeking to address a gap in extant studies. The data are presented and analysed in three case studies of different project-based organisations operating in the UK construction sector presented in Table 1. The companies are different in terms of size, revenue and number of employees. The data presented are analysed by a narrative approach (Brown and Kreps, 1993). The narrative analysis was selected as the basic methodology in data interpretation since the purpose of this research is to provide an overview of the current trends and regimes related to CSR in the UK construction sector and explore the incentives behind them. As the data are presented on the basis of a narrative analysis, the research can, hence, be characterised as “explanatory – analytical”. Such type of research design is widely used when the research involves interviews and case studies (cf. Brown and Kreps, 1993; Currie and Brown, 2003). The adopted case study design involves a limited number of cases, since the data are aimed to be examined in detail. The multiple case study involves semi-structured interviews with senior managers responsible for CSR initiatives from the three selected UK project-based construction organisations. This was accompanied by the analysis of these companies’ strategies, reports and websites on CSR-related issues and initiatives.

4.3. Data collection

This study explores narratives of CSR answering the questions: How and why CSR-related activities are implemented? To what extent CSR is formally incorporated within the companies’ business plan? The empirical data were collected through a 30-min face-to-face interviews with senior managers of UK project-based construction organisations who are involved in the decision making for the CSR strategy. The interview questions together with the rationale are outlined in Appendix. For the purposes of this research, semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate method because they allow flexibility of asking a series of questions including areas spontaneously initiated by interviewees (Matthews and Ross, 2010; Walliman, 2006). All the interviewees were given a brief outline of the topic under discussion along with some indications of the research objectives. Considering the fact that each of the presented companies had a different CSR-related

Table 1
Project-based construction organisations' and interviewees' characteristics.

Project-based construction organisations	Companies' characteristics	Interviewees profiles
Company A	UK Revenue 2015: £3–5 billion Number of employees: 10,000–30,000 Share price FTSE100: 100–300	Interviewee 1 (I1) Current role: Head of Sustainability Previous roles: • Sustainability Manager (same company) • Sustainability Manager (other company) • Senior Sustainability Consultant (other company) Years of experience: 10 Interviewee 2 (I2) Current role: Health, Safety, Environmental and Sustainability Manager - Social Value Previous roles: Sustainability manager (the same company) Years of experience: 8
Company B	UK Revenue 2015: £1–3 billion Number of employees: 5,000–10,000 Share price FTSE100: N/A Parent company share price TSE100: 500–1,500p	Interviewee 3 (I3) Current role: Director of Environment Previous roles: Other managerial roles (same company) Years of experience: 9
Company C	UK Revenue 2015: £0.5–1 billion Number of employees: 2,000–5,000 Share price FTSE100: N/A Parent company share price TSE100: 200–500p	Interviewee 4 (I4) Current role: Head of Sustainability Previous roles: Sustainability Manager (same company) Years of experience: 10 Interviewee 5 (I5) Current role: Business Developer Manager Previous roles: Other managerial roles in the same company Years of experience: 8

strategy, quite often the questions were adapted on each company's culture.

One of the main goals of this research is to explore the incentives behind CSR strategies as narratives. Access to senior managers or those responsible for crafting those strategies was, hence, critical. Given the population of those companies and employees along with the difficulty in approaching people of that level, the first person that was approached was the owner of a construction consulting firm, who had direct contacts with contractor companies. He, then provided the details of different level of people working within UK contractors and introduced the researcher (second author) by e-mail. The researcher approached all the contacts by e-mail, introducing the purpose and context of the research. From the seven companies that the researcher was introduced to three of them were selected. The first contact fits the profile of the study, and he was the one who expanded the network; the basic procedure on sample selection for this research is "snowballing sampling" (Walliman, 2006). All the interviewees are senior managers who are responsible for crafting CSR-related strategies for their firms or are part of the decision-making process for those initiatives.

4.4. Data analysis

The three case studies were analysed based on the adopted narrative analysis on CSR. The semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed resulting in 20 pages of transcripts. The narrative analysis of interviews was accompanied by the analysis of companies' documents, reports, strategies and websites. The analytical process involved identifying plots

which was used as a means of ensuring meaningfulness and coherence (Polkinghorne, 1995). The common narrative plots identified across three studies are: CSR engagement, the business case, CSR drivers and incentives. It is presented in Appendix. The analysis was further careful to highlight instances of repetition and/or performative intent. Following a narrative inquiry, the interviewees' narratives are seen as socially constructed and contested. The quotations from the interviewees support the empirical findings.

5. Research findings

5.1. Company A

5.1.1. CSR engagement

Company A is engaged with CSR activities for the past seven years. Narratives of CRS are formalised in an annual report and official website of the company. The underlying activities of the given organisation which fall into the scope of CSR are presented under the label "sustainability". Even though the current strategies and activities of company A have been evolved, they were always aligned with the three identified pillars of CSR – the social, economic and environmental – which are addressed as "sustainability" (Carroll, 1991). As Interviewee 1 (I1) mentioned, the company A is among the first construction companies to introduce an official "sustainability roadmap". The plan was first presented in 2008 and was fully incorporated in 2010, whereas before 2008 the activities related with CSR were mainly project-driven and involved a small number of KPIs (Key Performance Indicators):

"The term CSR is getting old. We call it corporate responsibility. The minute you put the word 'social' in there in theory you exclude the other two (economic-environmental)". (I2)

Of particular note is the shift in labels from CSR to "corporate responsibility". The main goal of this strategy is for the company to become a "sustainability leader" to a level that would "push the market"; they try to act "beyond compliance" so that they could always be a step forward from competitors. Interviewee 1 (I1) recognises that this as a "high level vision" that is fully integrated into the formal management processes. The year 2008, the financial crisis in the UK, was a benchmark for the company's CSR engagement:

"What is quite complicated to understand is that nothing ever stays still. The company is changing and the market was really pushing 5 years ago. It was mainly client-driven since clients wanted to diversify themselves and also government driven (public contracts). So in 2008 when everything kind of slowed down, we had to look again at our sustainability strategy both from an environmental and social perspective and to take a business approach on this." (I1)

Since the company is global, the sustainability roadmap is formally presented with a different name on the website and is basically the company's global business strategy. The local branches have clear instructions by the CEO – top-down driven – to adjust those strategies with the local market and client needs. Therefore, not all the activities presented in the public report are implemented in reality like this. However, all the activities come with an "action plan" which is communicated to the top level local managers (Heads of Sustainability). For the given company, the social aspect is quite distinct, since there are certain people, both entry-level employees and managers like the interviewee 2 (I2), who are dealing only with the "social value added activities". It is clear that all of them focus either on environment or the society aspects, and the company is focusing on the following key aspects:

- Management of environmental impact
- Materials and waste reduction
- Supply chain relationships
- Employee skill-set
- Apprentices

- Engagement with local communities

Interviewee 1 (I1) mentioned the fact that when she is leading a new activity, she uses the global roadmap as a guidance and then adjusts this with different project types (e.g. highways, local projects, infrastructure, energy and power). During the years, the activities were re-evaluated with the focus on “what is the economic benefit of their social value added activities”.

5.1.2. The business case of CSR

Company's A sustainability strategy become formal since 2010 as part of the business plan. Both interviewees agreed that the company is using this strategy in order to differentiate themselves from competitors and to gain market share. Company A is among the project-based construction organisations which focus on the social issues of the broader concept of CSR in such a way that they have managers with “sustainability” in the job titles to lead those activities (i.e. Interviewee 2 (I2)). Sustainability strategy is a key part of the business, and a substantial number of employees work towards implementing it, from entry level consultants to different heads who lead those activities. Even though they cannot actually measure the economic benefits of all these activities or explicitly link them with an amount of profit, they are in a process of exploring them by using an internal system of KPIs. They also have as a plan to record their social value offering for every pound they spend on sustainability activities.

5.1.3. CSR drivers and incentives

The drivers for CSR engagement are identified by interviewees as being both extrinsic and intrinsic. The company's extrinsic drivers, as presented by interviewees 1 and 2 (I1 and I2), are the following:

1. Clients. Different client segments (i.e. private investors, public authorities) may have different requirements when it comes to sustainability. Interviewee 1 (I1) mentioned the fact that some clients could lead them when it comes to practices related with sustainability when for example ask for an innovation or a “green initiative” for a project in order to be diversified:

“Quite often we work closely with our clients. We support them and they support us. We may even help them with their sustainability strategy and they support ours.” (I1)

Both interviewees also highlighted that prospect clients sometimes specifically ask to provide them with the company's sustainability initiatives before making their decision during the bidding process.

2. Legislation/Government strategy is one of the main identified drivers for initiatives related to both the environment and society. Whereas legislation related to environmental issues, such as carbon emissions or material waste, is presented for many years now; the one addressing social issues was first presented in 2013 under the [Social Value Act \(2016\)](#) in the UK. This initiative was a key driver for the company's “social value-added activities” and strategy. Interviewee 2 reflected on the role of government taking a leadership role in searching for meaning of the corporate responsibility:

“It is called corporate responsibility for a reason. The world is global now - CR is beyond government influence. We need governments to take the leadership role but actually corporations are bigger than countries now and they operate in so many different spaces that we have a responsibility to operate responsibly and not negatively”. (I2)

3. Competition. Company A has set as a goal to be the industry leader on sustainability. They position themselves very strongly on the social piece whereas their competitors mostly promote “the green aspect” of it.

4. NGOs. A few years back the company had issues with an NGO. During that period of time clients questioned the firm's position on sustainability, which then led to further action from the company's behalf and enhanced their efforts in organising more sustainable activities.

The company's intrinsic drivers, as presented by interviewees 1 and 2 (I1 and I2), are the following:

- Cost savings: There is an important commercial benefit to the company in managing and understanding the environmental impact better than competitors and substantial cost-savings by following green initiatives such as minimising material consumption.
- New employees: A good amount of activities within sustainability strategy involve high-level employee training. A key sustainability issue for the company is the aging population, therefore they seek to upgrade the workforce and attract new talents with better skillsets.
- Company's environmental impact: The environmental impact of the activities and projects that company A is engaged with is a major concern for them. Not only they try to measure it but they are actively involved in measuring the percentage they manage to mitigate every year when that is possible.
- Social aspect: As interviewee 2 (I2) specifically mentioned, company A perceives their sustainability strategy as social-oriented, since all the activities are either directly or indirectly linked with society.
- Biodiversity: Interviewee 1 (I1) reported biodiversity as an issue which needs to be addressed. Given the impact that those issues have for the firm (e.g. massive costs) it is reported as an intrinsic driver for the company's strategy.

5.2. Company B

5.2.1. CSR engagement

Company B has been active on activities related with CSR for at least a decade, although as interviewee 3 (I3) specifically mentioned they do not formally call their strategies as CSR, but rather they focus on five sustainability areas which are aligned with the concept of CSR identified by the literature ([Jones et al., 2006](#)):

- Ethics
- Environment
- Health and Safety (HS)
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Corporate community investment

The main goal of this strategy, which was actually introduced during first quarter of 2016, is for the company to be an industry leader in each of those five areas. All the activities within the new strategy were grouped into those five topics after a thorough competitor and market analysis, which clearly pointed out that those areas will be important for the construction market in the next five or ten years. Even though they have distinguished five areas within sustainability they acknowledge that there are other aspects within that concept as well, such as legislation and compliance. As interviewee 3 (I3) pointed out, the social element is quite distinctive in the five areas. Within “ethics”, the social aspect lays within “transparency” which has now been a clear public demand. They believe that transparency will be a huge challenge for all the businesses and an opportunity at the same time in the future. The activities related with the “environment and health and safety”, albeit mainstream for a contractor, go beyond legislation and overpass the basic “market requirements”. Within “health and safety”, for example, they do not only care about the health and safety of their employees, but also of their supply chain and community members. The social aspect within “diversity and inclusion” consists of the fact that although construction is an industry dominated by middle-aged white men, company B wants to attract people from different academic backgrounds and

nationalities and provide them with an opportunity to work in construction. When it comes to “community corporate investment”, Company B has been involved with volunteering schemes and more than ten charity partnerships for years and they encourage their employees to be active community volunteers through certain activities.

Interviewee 3 (I3) clarified that the focus on social value is a narrative arising both from the market and society. Being operating in the construction sector, company B identified that their sustainability activities were more environmental oriented because of the maturity of existed legislation. Since their competitors started to be more engaged with the social aspect and the public liked that, they realised that they had to do more. This new strategy is also an effort of them to progress on the non-environmental oriented activities in order to keep up with competitors. Company's B sustainability strategy is published on their official website. As interviewee 3 (I3) reported, they are among the companies that actually fulfil the presented strategies in practice at a percentage higher than 80%.

5.2.2. The business case of CSR

Interviewee 3 (I3) highlighted that the given five areas were incorporated as a formal business strategy within the company's business plan at the end of 2015. Before that, CSR engagement was not formal although the scope of the previous activities they were involved at was aligned with the five aspects they used to define their “sustainability” strategy. Despite the fact that the strategy is now formal, they have realised that their engagement is more mature in some areas than others. Interviewee 3 (I3) pointed that crafting a new sustainability strategy would have great benefits for the firm such as an improved branding, enhanced ability to win more work, better bids, more motivated employees and higher attraction of new ones. The difficulty lays within defining what it means to be an “industry leader in those five areas”. It takes time to build up a perception around this and this is why construction industry still struggles with the meaning of CSR.

5.2.3. CSR drivers and incentives

Similar to company A, the drivers of this new strategy were recognised as extrinsic and intrinsic. Among the basic extrinsic ones are the following:

- Clients
- Competition
- Communities
- Legislation

Interviewee 3 (I3) mentioned that among the extrinsic incentives, the increasing legislation regarding the environmental impact and the emerged one addressing social issues, as well as the market's demand were quite powerful drivers that increased engagement on CSR-related activities for the majority of the companies in the industry.

Moreover, the broader public perception for companies as presented in the media was negative for a long time and in part is still now. The impression that businesses are only profit-maximisers and they do not care about transparency and societies was evident, as I3 reported:

“The industry during the past decade had become cynical about CSR. Some people thought that it's just about covering up our environmental impact”. (I3)

When client's started to specifically ask for sustainability related activities, it became clear that a new strategy is crucial in order for company B to win more business and market share. On the other hand, the reported intrinsic drivers are:

- Top-level (CEOs) management engagement
- Employees
- Branding

Equally crucial for the incorporation of the sustainability strategy, was the engagement of the top-level managers into those kind of activities. As interviewee 3 (I3) declared, the seven top managers of the company are always in a process of planning what they could individually do in order to add value to society and communities. Such an active involvement leads as an example and further motivates employee engagement.

Following a survey that company B did with newly appointed employees, the majority of them reported that they selected the given company because of its active engagement in CSR-related activities. Improved branding is also an identified incentive which could be partially related with monetary incentives. Interviewee 3 (I3) mentioned that better branding leads to more profits, even though they cannot yet quantify them or link them directly to their sustainability activities. When interviewee 3 (I3) was asked whether their new strategy is monetary or non-monetary driven he articulated:

“It is a mistake to try to separate the profit with purpose. The beauty of future business is in integrating these two issues and the whole narrative of the last years ‘business it's just business’ is obsolete. The future narrative should be that CSR is linked with profit and that is a good thing. Profit and purpose are just two sides of the same coin”. (I3)

The interviewee pointed towards the past narrative of CSR and future narrative of CSR connecting profit with purpose.

5.3. Company C

5.3.1. CSR engagement

Company C is also engaging with CSR activities for the past ten years. As both interviewees pointed out, the company initiated those activities during the period of 2006–2008. They acknowledge the term “CSR” although they formally present the relevant activities under the topic “People, prosperity and planet”. As interviewee 4 (I4) reported, the first CSR-related initiative was introduced in the firm ten years ago and it was relevant with the scope of Health and Safety. Other activities were incrementally added which were focusing on other aspects such as waste minimisation or mitigating diversity issues and thus CSR activities became part of the company's DNA. Company C's CSR orientation is towards the people, the company's prosperity and the planet as mentioned above:

“It's about the people we are engaged with, it's about being a successful business for our employees and our shareholders and it's about looking after the planet and being environmentally sensitive to what we do- because everything we do has an impact on the environment and the planet”. (I5)

The company's vision is to achieve a balance and a positive triple bottom line –considering their three pillars-as well as a sustainable business policy. They are committed to contribute to their economic development having an overall positive impact on society and the environment and improve the quality of life of the people that are engaged with, in order to secure a better future for the next generations. The main aspects of the company's CSR activities are the following:

1. People: Customers, employees, supply chain partners and other stakeholders
2. Planet: Environmental issues (e.g. monitor carbon reduction and energy usage); reducing waste
3. Prosperity of the business

Apart from those three main pillars, the company's CSR activities are also focusing on health and safety, diversity and inclusion and engagement with local communities.

Company C's CSR strategy involve a vast array of activities, the majority of which is accompanied with specific targets that they need to

be achieved. Regarding the social CSR element, the company's strategies have a clear long-term perspective. One of the basic characteristics of those type of activities is the aspect of "legacy". The company produces the so called "legacy plans" for every project under which they introduce initiatives such as employment and training of local employees, purchase of local materials or the engagement with local schools in order to inform students about career opportunities within construction. The company's legacy plans focus on the highest possible value potential that local communities could benefit from. As interviewee 5 (I5) reported, one of the worth-mentioned aspects of their environmental activities is the fact that they try to predict key variables such the energy usage or the carbon emissions of every project in advance, on a "pre-contract information" basis. After the completion of the project they record the "real measurement", monitoring that way their performance. They produce an annual report as well as a report for the company's board on a quarterly basis. In addition, all the employees are informed for the company's CSR initiatives and achievements through a monthly newsletter. Moreover, brainstorming workshops are organised on a regular basis in order for the employees to be actively engaged on those initiatives by sharing their proposals and ideas on what more the company can do to secure a sustainable development. At least 80% of the activities presented within the company's annual report are implemented in practice, as interviewee 5 (I5) clarified.

5.3.2. The business case of CSR

Company C is a part of a group of companies, the board of which presented a strategic agenda on CSR for the years 2016–2020 as a part of the broader business plan. This is the first formal exercise on CSR ever presented for these companies. Prior to that CSR-related activities were more communicative. This initiative is a part of a restructuring process that the parent company is working on for the past eight years. During the period 2008–2010 the board was facing financial and commercial issues and realised that a new orientation was needed. A new approach on their sustainability strategy was a key focus area:

"The question is what is the business case for sustainability? I always say that the world of businesses is in a transition towards only good and sustainable companies being profitable and being in business. So there is no bigger business case than to be properly sustainable". (I4)

"A company's commercial issues have to be in place before they can start working for the greater good. To all global businesses is important first to stay in business and then to be lean, efficient, effective, qualities highly related with the concept of CSR". (I5)

5.3.3. CSR drivers and incentives

Not dissimilar with company A and C, both interviewees 4 and 5 (I4 and I5) agreed that the drivers for their CSR strategy are both extrinsic and intrinsic. The identified extrinsic drivers for company C are the following:

- Client preferences
- Market needs
- Competition
- Legislation

Even though they acknowledge the mentioned extrinsic incentives, when it comes to CSR strategies Company C adopts a proactive culture. Meeting client needs is among their top priorities. Even though their clients do not specifically ask for those strategies, they definitely welcome such initiatives. Company C has identified that CSR-related strategies improve their bids and differentiate them from competitors:

"Clearly we want to meet client needs but also we want to be a little bit ahead of the curve and anticipate client needs but at the end of the day it is what clients are looking for that matters and we need to respond as responsible contractors". (I5)

CSR standards imposed by the market, competition and legislation are perceived as the "basic requirements" for Company C. Within their new CSR strategy, they always try to be one step ahead of the basics.

"It's more than legislation for us and it has been that way for a long time ago. We go beyond legislation every day, on every project- it's a minimum requirement. A good company doing good work doesn't need any legislation. The laws and regulations are in there to stop people from doing harm so when you operate on a circular basis without doing any harm you don't need any legislation". (I4)

The mentioned intrinsic incentives of the company are:

- Cost-savings
- Top-level management engagement
- Employees

As interviewee 4 (I4) amplified, cost-savings that come with meeting energy requirements and waste and emissions reduction are on the top of their agenda for their new CSR strategy. Company C is going to formally incorporate a "circular-based strategy" based on the concept of circular economy. They aim to create circular projects based on "restorative, regenerative and life enhancing" initiatives. Their board has set as key priority to produce a circular economic product, business model or service at some point over the next years. Interviewee 4 (I4) claimed that circular economy is the only current viable economic model. It is a highly profitable business proposition that does not do any harm and enhances well-being:

"We have to be profitable to stay in business and the enormous opportunity that we have now is whether we get this strategic agenda correctly. If that happens with the right way – we will be more profitable in the coming years compared to where we are now. I have no doubt about this". (I4)

As interviewee 5 (I5) pointed out, profit or gaining competitive advantage is not the main drivers of their CSR strategy although they know that they are identified benefits for the company:

"A product of CSR is competitive advantage- it differentiates us from competitions but it's not where we start from for any CSR policy. We are better than that and go even beyond that. We are socially aware, a responsible contractor but not mainly driven by beating the competition although we do see it as a commercial benefit at the end of the day". (I5)

The company C self-present itself as a "responsible contractor" which promotes CSR policy.

6. Discussion

6.1. Translating policy agenda into corporate responsibility of project-based organisations and their projects

All three presented cases seem to have a similar approach for the narratives of CSR and seem to follow the same timeline (Fig. 1) and market trends. Some differences may be distinct regarding CSR initiatives, purpose and strategic goal which basically consist of what differentiates each company from competitors.

As evident from the Figure and analysis, there are ongoing narrative interactions between narratives of CSR by government and policy and narratives of CSR by project-based organisations and their projects (Sergeeva and Winch, 2020). The macro-level sustainability agenda translates into narratives, commitments and actions by project-based firms who formalise and communicate narratives of corporate responsibility and sustainability. This is evident from active roles of project-based organisations in initiating CSR-related activities, crafting narratives and strategies, communicating and promoting them widely through websites and media.

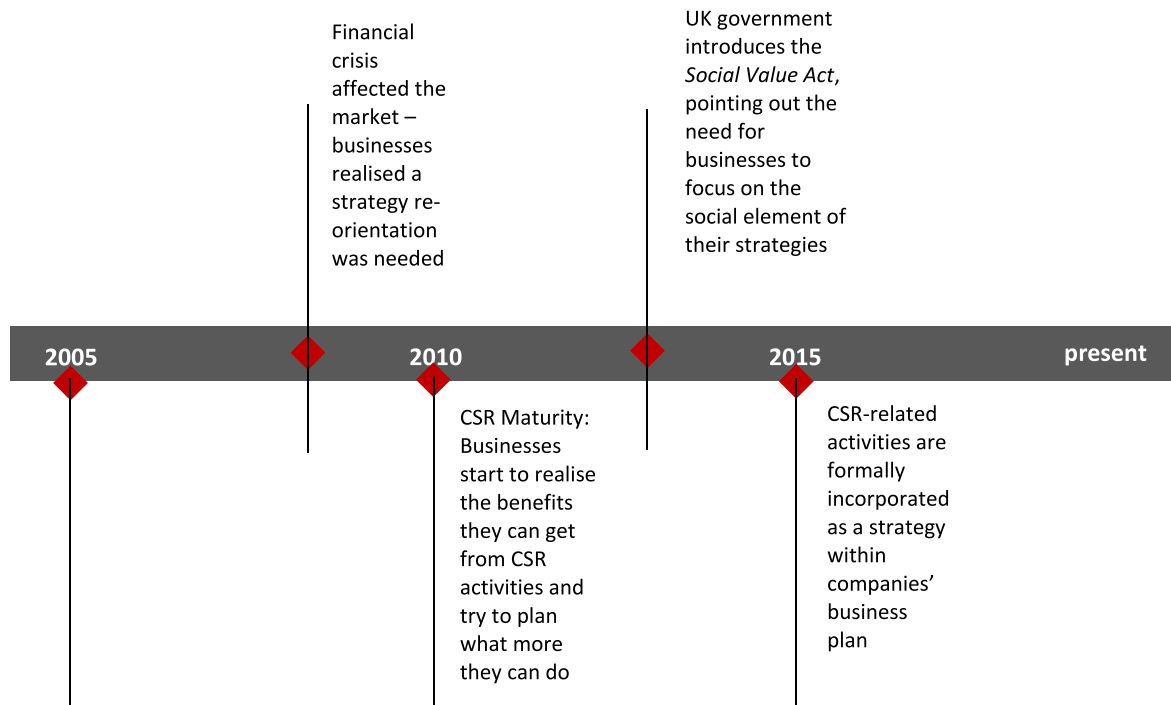


Fig. 1. Timeline of CSR narrative evolution derived from the empirical data.

The evidence shows that clients/owners play crucial role in driving sustainability and corporate responsibility initiatives through governance interface to initiate activities in projects (Gulino et al., 2020; Pisotska et al., 2022). The governance interface enables a process of translating policy and government agenda into corporate responsibility and commitments by project-based organisations and their projects.

The three identified pillars of CSR – the social, economic and environmental ones (Carroll, 1991; Elkington, 2004) – are evident on all the presented cases. Company C almost directly mentions them in their formal CSR strategy; “people” represents the “social” element, “prosperity” the “economic” and “planet” the “environmental” one. When it comes to CSR-related activities, the three project-based organisations seem to be primarily focusing on environment (e.g. energy usage, carbon emissions, waste reduction or other green initiatives), health and safety, diversity and engagement with local communities (*Green paper: Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility 2001*).

CSR in all cases is not an abstract group of activities (Porter and Kramer, 2006); it has been fully incorporated within the companies’ formal strategies. All of them have a distinct entity (or at least a team) that is dealing with these strategies, led by high-level managers. Table 2 shows the available role in the sector that are linked with the narrative of CSR. As interviewee 2 (I2) mentioned, a part of CSR evolution is its name per se. Interviewee 2 (I2) suggested that will be a change in

terminology from “corporate social responsibility (CSR)” to “corporate responsibility (CR)”. That is an emerging narrative, not only for the construction sector.

Another similar point of reference is the fact that all the mentioned companies adopt the “act beyond compliance” culture CSR (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001; Vogel, 2005). They think this is a strategy that would differentiate them from competitors. Moreover, there is more of an emphasis now on the social aspects and it is definitely a narrative that is adopted in the construction sector, as all interviewees agreed on. Specifically, interviewee 3 (I3) who mentioned that before they introduce their new sustainability strategy they conducted a market and competitor analysis, provided a rough draft pointing out this narrative and acknowledged the fact that their company need to work more on that bit.

Company’s A main differentiator is that they have distinguished their social value-added activities within a different entity that daily deals with them. The fact that they have different heads and employees under the topic of “social value” is a main indicator. For Company C, almost 70% of their projects have a distinct social element. They are also trying to actually measure their social value impact. CSR is highly attached with the social element, and the arising trend of contractors in focusing more towards social value-added activities is not random. Business and society have always been highly interrelated and academics have actually identified the existence of two types of links: “inside-out” and “outside-in” linkages (Porter and Kramer, 2006).

Table 2

Available CSR-related roles within the UK construction project-based sector.

Head of Environment
Head of Environment and Sustainability
Director of Environment
Head of Sustainability
Sustainability Manager
Sustainability Operations Manager
Sustainability Technical Director
Environment and Sustainability Manager
Group Sustainability Manager
Health and Safety and Sustainability Manager
Environmental and Sustainability Advisor
Sustainability Analyst
Sustainability Project Manager

6.2. In search for organisational purpose

All the interviewees expressed their genuine interest for offering substantial social value which is formalised through the strategies they craft. The main challenge of project-based organisations is to find their purpose: to realise which are the most suitable strategies for their culture or which issues to address that would be aligned with their shareholder or client preferences. The emphasis is placed on CSR-driven mind-set in constructing sustainable company identity. It is through narratives of CSR that project-based organisations socially construct their identities as socially responsible businesses valuable for society

(Sergeeva and Winch, 2021).

6.3. The emergence of strategic narrative of CSR

Building up a perception on an emerging narrative that could potentially benefit the business is a key requirement for all managers. Given the fact that corporate responsibility is an emerging narrative (Czarniawska, 2016; Vaara et al., 2016), a certain amount of time would be required for managers to access its potentials before incorporating it in their formal strategies. It seems that now –as from 2016– the topic has reached that necessary maturity and the business case of CSR has emerged (see Fig. 1).

A well-defined strategy is all about the choices that businesses are making (Mintzberg, 1994). Considering the identified trend on social corporate investments, managers in order to get the best out of CSR activities should carefully access the potential social issues that could address. Given the amount of issues that communities are dealing with, a best-practice approach is needed in order for companies to gain competitive advantage. From a business perspective, the form of a more “strategic CSR” as presented by all the participants is definitely a component of competitive advantage for project-based organisations (Jones et al., 2006). It is evident that CSR-related initiatives could instil a new business culture of innovation and business process improvement (Porter and Kramer, 2006). For example, among the new innovations arising for contractors is the concept of “circular economy” which was mentioned in case study 3.

Apart from this, a well-defined CSR strategy could act as a mitigation measure for issues such as information asymmetry since the element of “transparency” is highly attached with the concept, as all participants agreed (Simon, 1991). From a social perspective, presenting CSR as a formal business strategy, companies could have a more effective agenda for addressing social issues and change the public perspective of project-based organisations being commercially aggressive. Changing the perception of public view could actually improve the business brand and attract new clients that would support that new culture. As an element of strategic CSR could be also perceived the “act beyond compliance” (Wright and Ferris, 1997). All interviewees seem to have already acknowledged that this aspect is more like a basic requirement for a competitive sustainability strategy.

7. Concluding remarks

7.1. Theoretical contribution to knowledge

This study contributes to the existing literature on CSR and project management studies by providing insightful understanding of the ways project-based organisations craft and maintain CSR-related narratives and demonstrate commitments and actions to wider policy agenda. It shows a process of translating the policy agenda into narratives of corporate responsibility, commitments and actions by project-based organisations and their projects. The governance interface drives a process of translating policy and government agenda into corporate responsibility and commitments by project-based organisations and their projects.

Narratives of corporate responsibility and their interactions with policy agenda have important implications in the ways organisations socially construct their identities. The empirical data demonstrate the ways project-based organisations construct their identities as “sustainable leaders”. The job roles with “sustainability” or/and “environment” in the titles have been created. Narratives of corporate responsibility at project-based organisation level interact with narratives of sustainability at policy and government level, playing a role in creating identities and new roles in organisation.

7.2. Policy recommendations and managerial implications

Narratives help to achieve consistency in establishing alignment of corporate responsibility that address the sustainability agenda across project-based sectors, organisations and projects through the connection to policy agenda. The policy agenda is translated into narratives of corporate responsibility, commitments and actions by project-based organisations and their projects. It is evident that leading project-based organisations are active in showing their CSR-related activities, initiatives and practices. It is also evident that key players are willing and enthusiastic to go beyond the requirements and expectations laid out in policy. Project-based organisations are active players in committing to achieving policy targets. Project-based sectors, organisations and projects would benefit from policy initiatives in funding more initiatives for CSR-related activities, awards and recognitions of best practices of corporate responsibilities and wider sustainability agenda. This will result in an interactive process of shaping policy in setting higher level targets for the project-based sectors, organisations and projects to achieve, which will drive innovation and continuous progress. It will also result in attracting more investments into projects that address and promote corporate responsibility.

A recommendation of this research at least for project-based organisations would be to consider the possibility of being listed in indexes related with CSR, such as UK FTSE and Russell Indexes. Such participation could assist in measuring the performance of CSR-related activities. This Index is available in London stock exchange and currently no project-based organisation is registered. It is evident that those elements in the Index are similar to the ones identified within the contractor’s CSR activities. Formalising CSR performance and being listed in CSR-related indexes could assist companies to further differentiate themselves from competitors, potentially increase their share price or attract “socially responsible” investors and clients. As interviewee 2 (I2) reported, sustainable and ethical investment is another identified trend that emerged after the financial crisis of 2008.

Finally, our evidence shows that corporate responsibility is a wide term and includes various aspects and initiatives. There are many ways for project-based organisations and their managers to demonstrate that they are socially responsible which includes but not limited to: contribute to improving health and wellbeing of people who work for them, providing them flexible working conditions and work-life balance, raising awareness of corporate social responsibility and ways of engaging in it, take part in local community projects etc.

7.3. Limitations and future research directions

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of the current research. The empirical investigation is based on only three case studies of project-based organisations in the UK construction sector, and interviews have been conducted with senior managers responsible for developing CSR strategies. Further investigation of CSR narratives of may engage with other owner and supplier organisations and their managers at different organisational levels. This will allow to investigate how narratives of CSR interact within the supply chain and between employees and their managers.

As a final recommendation of this research is to point out the need for investigating small and medium enterprises (SMEs) on the same topic. Another identified gap in the literature is the fact that smaller firms with less resources are not able to be as actively engaged to costly initiatives as the bigger ones and thus a huge gap in the market has already been created. Even though all participants highlighted their initiatives on managing the supply chain and be actively supporting their supply chain partners (e.g. suppliers and sub-contractors), the case of CSR for smaller-sized UK project-based organisations could be entirely different.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interests in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix*Rationale for the interview questions*

Q1: “What is the meaning of CSR for the company?”

Given the fact that CSR used to be an abstract group of activities which lack of purpose and not often aligned with the firm’s corporate strategy (Porter and Kramer, 2006) it is necessary to investigate from the beginning if the company has managed to identify a specific meaning.

Q2: “Is CSR formal or communicative?”

One of the main objective of this research is to point out the business case of CSR. Identifying whether CSR is a formal strategy or still an “abstract group of activities” is hence critical.

Q3: “What activities does it involve?”

Q4: “Where do those activities focus on and why?”

The scope of CSR-related activities that each company focuses will point out a pattern that UK contractors follow in terms of their CSR preferences. Q3 and Q4 will contribute on the configuration of a broader agreement on “CSR fulfilment” for the construction industry (Jiang and Wong 2016).

Q5: “To what extent are those activities intrinsic or extrinsic and which are the underlying incentives?”

Pointing out the nature of CSR incentives is among the research objectives as well. One of the main presented arguments of the given research is to what extent are CSR strategies monetary, non-monetary driven or in narrative forms (Duff, 2016; Jensen, 2002).

Q6: “How CSR practices work in practice?”

It is evident in the literature that a company’s presented CSR plan, albeit thorough and often exciting, is only in part implemented in practice, misleading that way the public view (Porter, 1991).

Q7: “Which are the identified benefits for the firm?”

The existing research has been controversial on the nature of the benefits that a company can gain by implementing CSR-related activities.

Q8: “Is CSR a formal corporate strategy?”

Following up on Q2, Q8 aims to confirm whether CSR-related activities are fully incorporated within the company’s business plan.

Q9: “Do you use it as a means of mitigation to address principal-agent, moral hazard, information asymmetry issues?”

Some researchers identified that CSR could act as a mitigation measure on such issues (Preston, 1989), (Simon, 1991). Another research goal is to point out whether contractor companies are aware of that.

Q10: “Which are your personal incentives? Are they aligned with the firm’s official strategy?”

Considering the fact that all the interviewees are the executives which are responsible in crafting those strategies, Q10 aims to point out the personal incentives of those managers (Wright and Ferris, 1997).

Table Narrative analysis of the empirical data

Narrative plots	Narrative sub-plots (2nd order coding)	Narrative examples (1st order coding)
CSR engagement	CSR activities CSR strategies Sustainability roadmaps CSR-related roles Areas of focus	Labelling CSR-related activities Social, economic and environmental pillars and aspects Areas of sustainability and CSR Relevant CSR activities Vision of organisations Minimising negative impact
The business case of CSR	CSR strategy as part of business strategy and business plan Sustainability strategy Strategic agenda	CSR strategy and business strategy Benefits of CSR-related activities Internal system of KPIs in relation to sustainability activities

(continued on next page)

(continued)

Narrative plots	Narrative sub-plots (2nd order coding)	Narrative examples (1st order coding)
	Changes in labels from corporate social responsibility to social responsibility	A process of formalising CSR strategy Communicating and promoting CSR strategy Prosperity and legacy of the business
CSR drivers and incentives	Extrinsic and intrinsic drivers and incentives Organisations' aspirations and purpose Acting beyond internal and external factors Policy and macro-level agenda as driver for CSR in organisations	The role of clients in driving CSR-related initiatives and strategies The ways CSR is legislated and regulated Environmental impact of organisations Social issues Branding of organisations

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