

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

CSR practices among co-operatives. Experience and results of case studies

The behaviour observed in the organizations of the Social Economy framework has set a precedent in business practices which are based on social responsibility. There is also a growing interest in so-called Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a management model implemented in different types of for- and non-profit organizations, which entails a commitment to a set of values linked to all its stakeholders.

Within the framework of the Social Economy, cooperatives operate under the criteria, values, and principles of CSR. They have an interest in the community and in providing service to their members, not only economically but also socially and environmentally. There is a body of evidence which shows the link between the development of CSR policies (economic, social and environmental) and the cooperative values and principles laid out by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA, 1995). These studies support the claim that the very nature of cooperatives implies socially responsible behaviour.

In the last two decades, and more intensely during the recent economic crisis, Spanish cooperatives have shown an increasing interest in the development of CSR policies through concrete actions (Monzón and Antuñano, 2012). Likewise, cooperatives seek to broaden the communication channels with their stakeholders and with society as a whole, through the preparation of well-defined and accessible CSR reports, as an additional element of transparency in their management model.

In light of the above, the general objective of this study is to observe and verify the effective CSR compliance in a scenario of economic crisis across cooperatives from different sectors and environments. This issue entails the analysis of the management of CSR actions, derived from the relations with the relevant agents, according to the Theory of Stakeholders (Turker, 2009). This is linked to the nature of cooperatives and their operating principles given their afore-posed predisposition to more effective CSR implementation in comparison to other business formulas (Bel and Marín, 2008; Sanchís and Rodríguez, 2018). This facet goes hand in hand with a marked interest in transparency, accountability and the preparation of SCR reports as a way of transmitting their differentiating characteristics to their interest groups (Gallardo and Castilla, 2015).

In addition, the economic literature on the subject recognises CSR as a fundamental resource for creating a competitive advantage applicable to cooperatives. These organizations develop strategies that allow them to survive thanks to their economic results, reflected in the obtaining of adequate surpluses (López and Marcuello, 2006), by the aim of providing services to members over time, and all in tune with the demands of the different interest groups. For these reasons, the second objective of the

study is to contrast the CSR implementation with profit generation in these entities, in a context of economic crisis, and to seek certainties on the alignment between the social and economic function of the cooperatives (Gallardo and Castilla, 2015).

Following Villareal and Landeta (2010), a case study methodology has been applied. For this, we have selected six Spanish cooperatives from different sectors with a high degree of significance within the Ranking "Relevant Companies of the Social Economy" 2010-2011 published by the Social Economy Business Confederation (CEPES). Subsequently, the chosen cooperatives have been refined and sorted based on the available documentation. For this, first all the potentially comparable information regarding the development of CSR actions has been collected. Then, the available financial data have been obtained. In parallel, qualitative and quantitative information of these cooperatives has been extracted from the publications of CSR and economic reports. These data have been complemented with information from other secondary sources.

Consequently, the relevant CSR factors relating to the social, economic and environmental dimensions have been determined according to the RSECOOP model (2011) following the indicators of the Global Reporting Initiative. Then, the economic-financial ratios have been selected, which reveal positions in accordance with the different interest groups of the selected cooperatives.

Next, we start from the hypothesis, widely reviewed in the literature, which associates cooperative principles with behaviours consistent with the development of social responsibility towards stakeholders, and considers that these organisations should integrate these behaviours into their management policies (Server and Capo, 2009). This issue is closely related to the creation of added (Mozas, 2010) and the obtaining of lasting competitive advantages (Castilla et al., 2015). Thus, under the stated objectives, a basic evaluation of compliance with the relevant CSR factors for these six cooperatives is first carried out (COCETA, 2001). To this end, the results obtained are verified and compared using the numerical values offered and are grouped into charts for better visualization of the degree of compliance (concentration-dispersion) with the CSR in the three vectors considered. Then, the CSR values obtained are contrasted with the average values of the profitability ratios applied for these cooperatives, to observe possible relationships between compliance with the CSR variables and the economic results of the organizations.

After analyzing the CSR practices developed by the cooperatives under study, relatively high compliance with socially responsible behaviours has been observed, since the results show positive values and highly homogeneous deviations.

However, not all cases denote a development of CSR according to the relative position of the cooperative in the market and its economic results. Therefore, a degree of commitment to its stakeholders based on the specific corporate culture and values present is perceived. On the other hand, certain biases in the configuration of the CSR have been observed as an integral business management model,

since not all CSR vectors have been observed with the same intensity in each of the cases. Also, there is a correlation in the cooperatives between the economic results obtained, measured in terms of commercial margin, and the overall development of CSR practices. It is reflected more intensely in the economic profitability ratios and corresponds to the progress of social responsibility aspects in the economic vector. Finally, the results obtained could serve, in general, to strengthen the theory, generally accepted in the literature about the capacity of cooperatives to be more resistant in crisis environments by promoting a more socially responsible economy. However, it is still necessary for these organizations to make greater efforts to communicate their social performance and the advantages of the CSR's reported management as a tool for competing in markets.

One of the limitations of the study derives from the difficulty of configuring and examining a large number of variables. This leads to a reduced case study, which prevents, due to the size of the sample, the establishment and/or modelling of causal relationships for Spanish cooperatives in the reference period as a whole. Nevertheless, this issue has not been the object of analysis, as justified in the design of the study. We must also add the limitation of not having homogeneous and constant information for all cooperatives or more extended periods.

The contribution of this research is reflected firstly in the particularities that can be approached in greater depth from the analysis of specific cases, reviewing social and economic behaviour of cooperatives. And secondly, the proposed methodology can be used as a guide to be adapted and expanded to analyze this type of relationship in different contexts and scenarios. For example, the study can be replicated to analyze cooperatives from the same sector or to carry out cross-sector comparisons. Future research can consider specific geographical areas and different periods, with varying dimensions and sizes, or even ultimately, the model may allow comparisons with other companies that are not part of the Social Economy.

KEYWORDS: Corporate Social Responsibility, Social Economy, Cooperatives, Stakeholders, Sustainability Reports, Profitability, Performance.