

Sensitivity of Greek Organisations in Sustainability Issues [†]

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Abstract: Recently, the world has been faced with a variety of environmental, social, and economic problems. The effects of climate change and the lack of resources are constantly intensifying, while at the same time the impact of industrial production has become an international issue. Undoubtedly, this global paradigm and these relevant social and economic challenges require joint efforts at an international level. During the past few decades, a number of companies in Greece have undertaken initiatives towards sustainable development (SD) by adopting “green” practices. This work presents the findings of a survey that has been conducted in 2020, which investigates the extent of business contribution to the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Research was based on the analysis of sustainability reporting published by Greek companies. The key findings of the survey show that issues related to environmental protection, societal well-being, and citizens’ quality of life have attracted an increasing level of awareness in the Greek industry sectors. Issues such as climate change, as well as sustainable production and consumption, are becoming topics within companies’ day-to-day agenda.



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1. Introduction

In the last few decades, more and more organisations have engaged in sustainability reporting (SR) activities due to the uncertain situation of various crises in Greek society. Such crises were the economic crisis (2008), environmental crisis (e.g., Chernobyl, 1986; Desert Storm, 1991), and now the social crisis (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic). For example, during the economic crisis, Greek companies made an effort to be more active, especially regarding environmental issues, human resources, health and safety, and contributions to local communities. However, public concerns about controlling, monitoring, and measuring the impact of their activities on the environment and community life in business areas lead many businesses to publish sustainability reporting (SR). For that purpose, the United Nations (UN) enriched 17 Sustainable Developments Goals (SDG) with 169 targets related to economic, social, and environmental outcomes, observing the effects caused by the day-to-day operations of firms. By the 2030 Agenda, all 183 UN Member States have committed to accomplishing the SDG [1]. However, there is a gap in the literature review as previous studies have not completely enveloped the Greek reality. Thus, the aim of this study is to identify SR practices in an emerging field in addition to business contributions to the UN’ 17 SDGs. To achieve that, data mining techniques are applied to utilize the statistics available in the Greek community and provide contributions to various audiences including marketers, for-profit and non-profit stakeholders, and the academic community generally.

2. Conceptual Framework

Stakeholders are increasingly expecting more data about an organisation's environmental and social activities, in addition to its economic performance. Thus, firms adopt SR practices (which are multidimensional in orientation) to enhance the communication with stakeholders [2]. Corporate reports usually focus on disclosing environmental issues [3], on the social dimension (corporate social responsibility [CSR] reports) [4], or on the triple-bottom-line approach [5]. Particularly in Greece, firms engage in CSR activities as they appear to be developing [6] and offer a number of benefits [7]. Although Greek companies are truly concerned about the environment, resources, quality of life, and social matters, they are unaware of CSR principles [8].

Interestingly, the evolution of corporate SR seems to have several similarities with the concept of sustainable development (SD) [9]. Specifically, SD defined primarily by Brundtland Report [10], the most widely accepted suggestion, as *"the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"*. In the wake of the "Brundtland report", however, numerous international organisations proposed similar sustainable claims. These practices can make progress in the concept of SR by introducing the UN' SDGs [11]. The UN' SDGs could assist multinational companies in improving their CSR performance and contribution to SD [12]. Therefore, CSR reports can support such solutions in business activities that are socially responsible, environmentally friendly and, at the same time, economically valuable [13] representing the business's overall strategy and objectives, covering issues and topics, and offering information about the company's results.

3. Materials and Methods

Due to the volume of information about corporate SR, an empirical analysis was applied. More precisely, sustainability-in-data-mining techniques are used to discover new information hidden within large databases [14] and distinguish between huge quantities of irrelevant data with interesting connections. The research subject in this study were large-sized organisations (European Commission: No 70/2001, EN 2001 L 10/33) that published sustainability reports in Greece. The case of Greece is a unique case study due to the difficulties that the country faces (see introduction). In total, fifty (50) CSR reports were collected and analyzed with regard to the 17 SDGs set by the UN and the annual reports, providing readers with the opportunity to study the latest data of the organisation. In particular, CSR reports were grouped into the companies' industry: (a) production organisations (13/50), (b) service organisations (10/50), (c) food production (8/50), (d) product merchandising (6/50), (e) financial service (5/50), and (f) energy (8/50).

4. Results

As shown in Table 1, all 50 organisations contribute to the above SDGs. Especially indicators such as "SDG No. 8—decent work and economic growth", "SDG No. 12—climate action", and "SDG No. 13—sustainable consumption and production" gathered the highest demand. To expand the contribution level of the companies to the SDGs, some subcategories were divided. Taking the SDG No. 3 first, it was divided into the following primary categories: improving health benefits (41/50) and health and safety training activities (15/50). Turning to the SDG No. 4, it concerned staff training and information (46/50) and youth support (33/50). Regarding the SDG No.8, it was divided into supporting economic growth (47/50), establishing decent work (50/50), respect for human rights (46/50), and reduction of occupational accidents (36/50). In the SDG No. 12, 48/50 organisations reported in their most recent CSR that they reduce waste generation each year through the recycling and reuse of certain materials. While the 49 companies stated that they operate responsibly in terms of energy consumption. Finally, all organisations seem to contribute to the SDG No. 13 categorized into environmentally friendly raw materials (50/50) and renewable energy sources (40/50).

Table 1. Corporate sustainability reports in relation to the UN' SDGs.

| Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)'s | | | Organisations | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---------------|-----|
| No. | Goals | Outline Description | n = 50 | % |
| 1. | No Poverty | End poverty in all its forms everywhere | 20 | 40 |
| 2. | Zero Hunger | End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture | 20 | 40 |
| 3. | Good Health and Well-being | Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at ages | 45 | 90 |
| 4. | Quality Education | Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all | 46 | 92 |
| 5. | Gender Equality | Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls | 37 | 74 |
| 6. | Clean Water and Sanitation | Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all | 37 | 74 |
| 7. | Affordable and Clean Energy | Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all | 26 | 52 |
| 8. | Decent Work and Economic Growth | Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all | 50 | 100 |
| 9. | Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure | Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation | 35 | 70 |
| 10. | Reduced Inequalities | Reduce income inequality within and among countries | 35 | 70 |
| 11. | Sustainable Cities and Communities | Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable | 35 | 70 |
| 12. | Sustainable Consumption and Production | Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns | 50 | 100 |
| 13. | Climate Action | Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy | 50 | 100 |
| 14. | Life Below Water | Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, marine resources for sustainable development | 7 | 14 |
| 15. | Life on Land | Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reversing land degradation and halt biodiversity loss | 23 | 46 |
| 16. | Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions | Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels | 35 | 70 |
| 17. | Partnerships for the Goals | Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development | 21 | 42 |

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper contributes to the literature concerning CSR practices and UN SDGs. Although there are many researchers that focus on corporate reports, examining the content

and quality of the information disclosed in sustainability reports, there is a limited number of studies that have carried out an analysis of the current status of corporate reporting practices in relation to the sustainability directions emerged from the Greek reality. In the light of this limitation, this paper examines CSR's activities in relation to the 17 UN' SDGs using an empirical analysis carried out in a sample of 50 Greek organisations that operate in six different industry sectors and publish sustainability reports.

The results of the empirical analysis indicate the CSR practices in relation to UN SDGs from various sectors, which is in line with Tsalis et al. [15] and Avramponi et al. [16], who highlight the need for further research on the content of sustainability reports from other industries. In the Greek context especially, outcomes of the empirical analysis are relevant since the investigated CSR practices were published by a leading group of Greek companies in corporate sustainability. Thus, this paper provides some evidence for the initial reactions of the Greek business community to the introduction of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

To be more specific, our findings suggest that all companies declared their contributions to at least one SDG. Issues related to environmental protection, societal well-being, and citizens' quality of life attracted an increasing level of awareness in the Greek industry sectors. Obviously, the current paper could also be a fruitful environment for designing future research in sustainability science. Scrutinizing a larger sample of companies operating in different countries with different institutional regimes could be extremely conducive to uncover that research in more detail. Except for that, further studies should identify factors, such as listing status of organisations, size, industry type, and CSR certification.

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