

Editorial of the Social Business Journal Special Issue

Sustainability and Business practices in North Africa and Beyond

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Prelude

Sustainability and social responsibility are recognized as key success factors for economic, social, legal and political actors worldwide. In the digital era, businesses have undergone major changes to embrace the new challenges introduced by these developments. In most Western countries, the integration of sustainability and CSR in business strategies has been widely used to improve market positioning (Ottman, 2011, 2017; Higgins, Stubbs, & Milne, 2018). More recently, the obligation to embrace sustainability and social responsibility became a requirement not only to fit the latest legal requests (i.e. climate change agreements, the certification norms, International Organization for Standardization 9001-2015, International Financial Reporting Standards, Social Responsibility, International Accounting Standards, the Conference of Parties agreements), but also, consumer claims for sustainability (Jaca, Prieto-Sandoval, Psomas, & Omazabal, 2018; O'Rourke, & Ringer, 2016; Ottman, 2011, 2017) and for a safer and cleaner environment (Trivellas, Kakkos, Vasiliadis, and Belias, 2017). As signatory countries to these agreements, as well as the General Agreements of Tariffs and Trade (GATT-WTO), countries from North Africa and beyond have to comply with these agreements and meet their domestic and international partners' expectations in terms of sustainability and CSR concerns.

Within business literature, CSR and sustainability are gaining interest amongst authors. For example, in the tourism sector, Font and McCabe (2017) considered the perspectives of both businesses and consumers and called for a better understanding of how contextual aspects influence the outcomes of pro-sustainability interventions. Moreover, there are calls for more diverse research methodologies and approaches to study sustainability (Bramwell, Higham, Lane, & Miller, 2017).

This special issue of Social Business is prompted by both the above mentioned advances and the debates that took place during the 3rd Edition of the LIGUE International Conference on the “ *Sustainability goals implementation in the era of digitalisation in North Africa and beyond*” organized in Tunis, 3rd- 4th December 2018. This international conference is ahead of the curve in addressing the challenges in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all the United Nations.

This conference attracted a total of 70 high quality paper submissions, spanning over numerous emerging topics related to the challenges of the implementation of the SGDs of the 2030 UN agenda, particularly for North Africa countries. Rigorously selected papers were eligible for inclusion in the indexed conference proceedings of the British Library (Structured Abstract) and for potential publication in a special issue of Social Business.

This special issue addressing the “Sustainability and Business practices in North Africa and Beyond” was developed primarily by Professor Hamida Skandrani (Chair of the LIGUE Laboratory, ISCAE, Tunisia), Dr Hazem Rasheed Gaber (Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Egypt) and Dr Kaouther Kooli (Bournemouth University, Business School, UK) in conjunction with Social Business guidelines and Editorial guidance over most of 2018. And, as a result, five (5) articles discussing the timely issues and challenges facing sustainability implementation in North Africa and beyond are presented. Specifically, this special issue aims to further the knowledge on CSR and sustainability theory and practice by prompting research into ways North African countries amongst others embrace sustainability and comply with the United Nations SDGs from multiple perspectives e.g. businesses, consumers, governments, etc. Accordingly, it contributes to the contextualisation of research focusing on sustainability and CSR by emphasising the factors hindering sustainability and CSR strategies and practices.

The five full papers in this special issue cover a wide range of issues and challenges relating to sustainability and CSR initiatives in North African countries (Tunisia) and more developed ones, e.g. Canada and Japan. In the first paper, Ines M'hissen, Jouhaina Gherib and Emna Gana-Oueslati address “*SMEs' expectations towards public policies related to CSR: Empirical evidence from Tunisia*”. As the concept of CSR is still understudied in the MENA region, the authors suggest covering this gap by investigating its implementation in Tunisia, a country part of this region. The study focuses on the public policies that can support SMEs commitment to CSR. Through conducting a survey on a number of Tunisian SMEs, the authors were able to examine SMEs expectations towards public policies to support their CSR commitment. As one of the very first studies on this issue, this study contributes to better understand the concept of CSR from the

industry perspective in Tunisia. Its importance lies in providing some recommendations for policy makers and regulators in Tunisia on how to promote CSR to organisations in various sectors. This study suggests that age of the SME and the type of activity i.e. the industry, have an influence on the firm's expectations towards public policies in terms of CSR support. The findings from this study provide a better understanding of Tunisian SMEs expectations which could help decision makers e.g. the governmental authorities, to design and implement appropriate strategies to promote the CSR commitment amongst SMEs.

This second paper titled "*Middle Management Versus Top Management: How to enhance Whistleblowing Mechanism on Detecting Corruption and Political Connection. Case of International Donor Funds in Tunisia*" and authored by Khaoula Ben Mansour, explores whistleblowing mechanisms to fight corruption in organisations. Following the 2011 events of the Arab Spring in 2011, whistleblowing is increasingly adopted to promote new ways of governance in Tunisian organisations. The authors uncovered the Whistleblowing mechanisms by collecting data using 55 semi-structured interviews with managers in the African Bank of Development "ADB", the United Nations Development Program ("UNDP") and the German Technical Agency "GIZ". The findings show that middle managers play an important role in an effective whistleblowing process, especially if they benefit from the top management and the Tunisian Anti-corruption agency support. The study results expand the understanding of the pivotal role played by middle managers in spreading an organisation's ethical culture, therefore supporting their inclusion in the Ethics Office in their organisation.

The third paper authored by Rym Bouderbala, Jihen Eljammi and Jouhaina Gherib addresses the *Relevance of Hofstede's model in identifying specific national cultural character in a North African country, namely Tunisia*. The study highlights cultural features that differentiate Tunisia from other Arab countries and, consequently, challenges Hofstede's classification, which includes Tunisia as part of one category i.e. Arab countries. It also offers evidences that it is misleading to put together countries belonging to the same geographical, religious and linguistic group in the same cultural group i.e. Arab countries. The Tunisian cultural context seems to be different from the European-American and Arab contexts e.g. in Tunisia, making profit is not the first concern for Tunisian managers. The study results give evidence for the influences the culture specificities may have on firms' adoption of CSR practices.

In the next paper titled "*How to enhance sustainability goals implementation in the business behavior: A lesson from the discussions of Japanese Small and Medium sized Enterprises*", Hiroko Oe and Yasuyuki Yamaoka explore the entrepreneurial orientation (EO) dimensions which led to Japanese SMEs sustainable

business behavior from their owners' perspective. The study reveals that in addition to the established EO dimensions, 'value co-creation' and 'contribution to the communities' are also key dimensions that must be considered in the Japanese EO framework. These dimensions are driven by the SMEs owners' emotional attachment, 'Pride,' as well as by 'Non-economic values with *Sanpo-yoshi*'. The research outcome provides valuable insights for SMEs' owners on how they can best implement the sustainable development goals by addressing the unique underpinning dimensions prompting SMEs' owners to adhere to the sustainability agenda 2030.

This study shed light not only on the EO dimensions of Japanese SMEs but also on the hidden driving forces deeply embedded in the local culture and history. '*Sanpo-Yoshi*' value, for instance, implies that the Japanese businesses are prone to contribute to three stakeholders, suppliers, customers, and society. This finding suggests that the public sector can intervene to enhance the relationships among these three stakeholders to sustain the SME businesses in their communication. Based on the seven EO dimensions can also be practical factors to drive their businesses to further stage, the managers of the organisations can evaluate critically each dimension to develop business strategies to increase the business performance. The proposed framework can be the basic analytical tool for reviewing, evaluating, and developing the business strategies to improve the business profile. This outcome of this study also can contribute to the deepening mutual understanding between different cultures in the global market.

The fifth paper "*Tell me more! An analysis of certifications and claims display practices on organic food front-of-packages*" authored by Soumaya Cheikhrouhou, Deny Bélisle, Stéphane Legendre, focus on the organic food market in Canada by examining the current practices of the Canadian organic food industry in terms of the use of certifications and claims on the front of their packages as a means of communication with consumers. The results reveal a discrepancy between what information is displayed on the organic food front-of-packages and organic food consumers' expectations in terms of certifications and claims e.g. taste and health related information. This paper uncovers inadequate and unclear information on certification effort -communicating the sustainability practices- in the Canadian organic food industry. Therefore, it contributes to the literature on communicating sustainability practices through the use of by means of certifications and claims. It also sheds more light on the gap between packaging design literature and the organic food products' industry practices.

Interlude

This special issue of *Social Business Journal* stands to make several theoretical and practical contributions on the motivational forces behind key players' expectations, perceptions and behavior; to embrace sustainability values and practices broadly and/or to the level needed for the UN 2030 agenda achievement.

Key insights that emerge from this special issue highlight the specificities of SMEs expectations towards public policies in terms of CSR support. This suggests a mismatch between governmental courses of actions -to foster the implementation of CSR strategy- and SMEs' needs in terms of accompaniment and therefore, hinder the achievement of the sustainable development goals specifically SDG 8 and 9. Alongside relevant support from the governmental authority, middle managers supported by the top management and the anti-corruption agency, can leverage an ethical climate by promoting transparent governance and therefore social justice inside and outside the organisation.

Specificities related to the cultural context also arise from the above contributions. For instance, national culture characteristics might influence the way firms adopt and practice CSR. This offers support to further study cultural differences notably, to question the current cultural classifications, e.g. Hofstede model, in relation not only to SMEs entrepreneurial orientation but also to CSR and sustainability adherence. This is in line with previous statements holding that national culture matters when it comes to sustainability and CSR practices by corporations (Vachon, 2010; Miska, Szócs, & Schiffinger, 2018).

In addition to the foregoing specificities, communicating on sustainability practices appears to be problematic even within developed markets where sustainability culture is more established, e.g. Canada. In this regard, discrepancies between organic food product industry's communication practices and consumers' expectations in terms of key information i.e. taste and health, were identified.

To move research on the implementation of the SDGs forward we would like to see more research in this area focusing specifically on (1) the national (e.g. policy makers) and cultural factors (e.g. risk avoidance) influencing firms' sustainability and CSR practices in North Africa and beyond, (2) the factors influencing marketing communications focusing on sustainability and CSR practices. Thereby, contributing to promote the achievement of objectives 8, 9 and 16.

Most importantly, studies going beyond considering each of the seventeen SDGs separately are needed. Indeed, dealing with the interlinkages between the SDGs provides a clearer picture on the potential discrepancies in the implementation of some of them against others. For example, the so-called "Arab Spring", in Tunisia, yielded greater focus on freedom of expression, democracy, transparency, accountability, governance, etc. According to The Legatum Prosperity Index™ 2019, Tunisia performs

most strongly in governance and living conditions but is weakest in Natural Environment. The highest registered improvement was in personal freedom compared to 2009. This suggests that more in depth understanding of the factors behind these disparities in achieving the SDGs is necessary. In this line, Kroll, Warchold, and Pradhan (2019), found evidence of a widespread and alarming inability to overcome trade-offs in sustainability objectives fulfilment and consequently a weakening in this regard for certain SDGs. They call for further research into how these trends can be reversed as otherwise they will seriously threaten the achievement of the UN Agenda 2030.

We hope that this special issue will stand as a first important step towards a better understanding of the challenges facing the implementation of the UNSDGs and that the articles included will provide a stimulus for more insightful research on the topic.

We hope that you will enjoy reading the papers and that you will gain insights there in!

Acknowledgments

Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks to the management and editorial board of Social Business Journal, above all to Professor Michael Baker, Editor-in-Chief, for his guidance and support, to Dr Anne Foy, Publishing Director of Westburn Publishers Ltd. and to Fiona Lees, Editorial Office Administrator.

We would like also to thank all the authors for their tremendous contribution to this special issue of Social Business Journal.

Finally our special thanks go to the reviewers for their patience in evaluating and improving significantly the manuscripts.

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