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Research Article

Corporate Social Responsibility and the Sustainable Development Goals in India: A Configurational Theory of Institutional Alignment and Transformative Governance

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Abstract
The institutionalization of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) through the Companies Act 2013 enabled shifting the perspectives of the corporate landscape in India from philanthropy being voluntary to a statutory requirement (Sarkar and Sarkar 2015) and compliance with India's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 will require an understanding of how the CSR expenditure of corporations can be understood as a strategic tool for national development rather than just compliance-driven expenditure. Although CSR is mandated by law and rhetoric, a major theoretical void exists regarding how to systemically understand the connections between CSR initiatives that involve the corporate sector's social investment and national development objectives. Based on Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory, and the Creating Shared Value model, this article presents the Strategic CSR-SDG Alignment Model (SCSAM), which provides an integrated understanding of how CSR can be transformed from compliance to a driver of sustainable and equitable growth. We conclude by presenting seven theoretical propositions about the configuration of CSR-SDG alignment; and outlining relevant implications for policymaking, managerial practices and future research. Lastly, the SCSAM adds to the body of knowledge regarding the business and society interface in emerging markets by providing a theoretical and institutional framework for aligning business accountability with the SDG framework.
Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development Goals, Institutional Theory, Creating Shared Value, Emerging Markets, ESG, National Development, India, Stakeholder Governance.

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an important way for businesses to participate in sustainable and inclusive development, especially in developing countries like India. CSR has evolved from a form of charitable giving to an organisational way to address social, economic and environmental problems in society. This change provides the opportunity to explore how CSR can be linked with national development priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

1.1 Background and Context

The transformation of corporate governance in emerging economies is closely tied to how states regulate corporations with respect to their social responsibility (CSR). In India, CSR has already gained legal support through Section 135 of the Indian Companies Act (2013), which requires that certain companies spend money on CSR activities, and it identifies what types of activities qualify under Schedule VII. With this addition to the law, India has become one of the first countries in the world to establish CSR as a legal requirement, which breaks away from the historical tradition of corporate philanthropy as a voluntary act by corporations in the Global South (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2015; Manchiraju & Rajgopal, 2017). Recent research indicates that CSR has become an increasingly important vehicle for creating social and environmental sustainability, especially after the 2013 Companies Act legislation mandating CSR expenditures by eligible companies (Chatterjee & Mir, 2008; Kumar, 2016).

In contrast to voluntary CSR frameworks that are common in Western economies, India has developed an entirely different institutional innovation with regard to compulsory CSR. Under India's mandatory CSR legislation, companies that meet certain financial criteria must spend a minimum of 2% of their average net profit on CSR initiatives (Manchiraju & Rajgopal 2017). This regulatory scheme is indicative of a wider trend among developing nations in using corporate assets as a tool for addressing socio-economic problems that cannot be solved by the government alone (Kolk 2016, Jamali 2008.)

India has initiated a new Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) framework through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This new SDG framework details 17 SDGs and 169 Targets, providing a comprehensive system for guiding the design and implementation of national policies and the conduct of the private sector. The SDGs reflect an unprecedented level of global consensus regarding the interconnectedness between Economic Prosperity, Social Inclusion, and Environmental Stewardship (Griggs et al., 2013; Sachs, 2012). With India's commitment to achieve the SDGs by 2030, a unique opportunity exists to align corporate activities with national development objectives. The SDGs also provide a common language for articulating the contributions of corporations to society, in addition to providing an organized set of tools and methods for reporting the impact of those contributions.

The active participation of non-state actors, particularly, Corporations, with their financial, technological, and organizational resources, is required for the conversion of SDG goals into national development outcomes (van Tulder et al., 2021; Scheyvens et al., 2016). Therefore, if integrated strategically with the SDGs, corporate social responsibility will provide an important opportunity to drive national development in India. Corporations will be able to significantly contribute to achieving sustainable and equitable growth for India through supporting institutional structures, encouraging cross-sectoral collaboration, and improving monitoring systems. However, for such potential to be realized, corporate social investments must be closely aligned with the SDG agenda. Currently, the academic literature lacks a sufficient level of theorization regarding the alignment between corporate social investments and the SDGs.

1.2 Problem Statement

While there is a legal requirement for organisations in India to engage in sustainable development, the reality is that there remains a significant gap between the actual engagement of organisations in this activity and the expectations of the law and society as a whole. The majority of the research to date has either focused on CSR from an organisational compliance point of view or as an individual firm's strategic choice. However, very few studies have attempted to consider CSR as part of an integrated system of national development (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005; Matten & Moon, 2008). As such, the SDG literature has presented corporate involvement in sustainable development as a factor input only, without adequately theorising through institutional mechanisms how corporate social investments can be transformed into quantifiable and sustainable development outcomes (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018; Montiel et al., 2021).

In India specifically, much of the existing literature has focused on the nature and extent of CSR spending patterns and compliance behaviour of firms. However, there remains a paucity of theoretically based studies that identify the conditions under which CSR activity translates into achieving SDGs and meaningful contributions (Muthuri & Gilbert, 2011; Arora & Puranik, 2004). The majority of the research conducted to date has been limited to sectoral expenditure analyses and/or studies on firm-level determinants of CSR disclosures. The result of this is that results must be interpreted with extreme caution and that it is now imperative that we develop integrative theoretical models to both direct empirical research and develop effective policies.

1.3 Research Gap

This study addresses three important omissions in the academic research concerning Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India: (1) The volume and distribution of CSR investments in India have been documented in prior research; however, there has been limited investigation regarding the institutional arrangements that facilitate the CSR-SDG component relationships (Kumar, 2016; Bhanot & Tiwari, 2016); (2) The theoretical constructs that underlie how CSR results in a transformational development effect have yet to be thoroughly explained, i.e., what are the unique combinations of institutional, governance and measurement forces that enable CSR to produce a transformational developmental effect instead of merely achieving the minimum regulatory requirements (Marquis & Raynard, 2015; Bromley & Powell, 2012); (3) The literature regarding CSR has not adequately considered the contradiction between the strategic need for value creation and the ethical responsibility of addressing systemic deprivation in developing countries (Crane et al., 2014; Visser, 2008).

The lack of evidence to support why some firms are able to go beyond compliance and others remain in a 'tick-box' approach is still unmet. In particular, the impact of institutional embeddedness, stakeholder co-governance and impact measurability on CSR-SDG alignment is still unclear. Furthermore, it is unclear whether these three constructs can work together to produce effects that surpass the additive contributions of each individual condition. Therefore, the aim of this study is to address all of these limitations through a comprehensive analysis of the existing CSR, institutional theory and sustainable development literature and to provide a theoretically-based framework for understanding these relationships.

1.4 Research Objectives

The purpose of this research paper is to create a comprehensive theoretical model—the Strategic CSR-SDG Alignment Model (SCSAM)—to show how corporations can align their social investments with their countries' priorities for development in developing countries. Specifically, this paper has four primary goals:

1. Synthesize the theories that support CSR-SDG alignment (Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory, and the Creating Shared Value paradigm) into a single coherent structure to explain how the three theories work together to promote CSR to achieve SDG.
2. Identify and explain what each of the three mediating constructs should be (institutional embeddedness, stakeholder co-governance, and impact measurability) and how they determine whether CSR makes a significant contribution to development or merely fulfills legal obligations.
3. Develop theoretical propositions about how to configure the three mediating constructs in order to enhance CSR effectiveness.
4. Describe the significance of the SCSAM for policy makers, corporate managers, and future researchers, specifically in relation to the Indian context.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Through this research, we will have successfully established the first extensive configuration-based view of CSR and SDGs within the context of emerging markets. The originality and importance of this study lie primarily within the manner in which it has been conducted, namely, in considering the interactions of mandatory CSR law, multi-stakeholder governance, and SDG outcomes — an approach that has not yet been attempted. The results of this work should represent a significant contribution to the field of CSR, in that they enable a paradigm shift from a focus on the expenditure of firms for the purposes of CSR, to a view of the systemic developmental impacts that CSR creates within society. Thus, policymakers will possess the knowledge necessary to create more effective regulatory frameworks, and corporate managers will be better positioned to move beyond simply complying with requirements, and instead focus on strategically creating value.

1.6 Organization of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is structured in the following way: Section 2 provides an overview of the theoretical foundations and relevant literature related to the development of the research's theoretical base. In Section 3, a Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development Goal Alignment Model (SCSAM) will be developed by identifying the core constructs of the model and articulating the theoretical propositions associated with the model. In Section 4, the theoretical, policy and managerial implications of the SCSAM framework will be discussed. Finally, Section 5 presents the summary of major contributions, limitations and future directions for research.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

According to Stakeholder Theory, businesses have other responsibilities to society than just maximizing shareholder wealth. Additionally, Stakeholder Theory's approach to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Sustainable Development emphasizes that a corporation's legitimacy is determined by its capacity to identify, engage, and respond to the expectations of multiple stakeholder groups. In the context of emerging economies, corporate legitimacy is particularly important due to the complex social, institutional, and developmental environment in which many corporations operate.

2.1 Stakeholder Theory and Corporate Legitimacy

According to Freeman (1984) and Donalson & Preston (1995), Stakeholder Theory proposes that the corporation represents a collection of Stakeholder relationships (i.e., Employees, Customers, Suppliers, Communities, and Governments), all of which hold legitimate claims to Value Creation within the Corporation. In Emerging Market countries, Stakeholder Salience experience higher intensity due to Institutional Voids (i.e., underdeveloped Governance Structures); thus Corporations operating in those countries have unique challenges in obtaining Corporate Legitimacy. In India, Stakeholders are facing severe developmental deficits in poverty, literacy, health infrastructure, and environmental degradation which increase Stakeholder Expectations of Corporations operating in the country.

The mandatory CSR legislation may be seen as a legal definition of the Stakeholder Claims placed on Corporations that place Community Welfare from the "Optional" Charity Status to a condition of Operational Legitimacy. (Jones et al., 2018; Muller & Kolk, 2010). However, Stakeholder Theory does not provide a full picture of the reasons why some Corporations exceed compliance and others operate with a "tick-box" mentality; therefore an Institutional Perspective must be included to account for Regulatory Coercion, Mimetic Pressures, and Normative Expectations.

2.2 Institutional Theory and Regulatory Coercion

Institutional Theory applies to how the organisation behaves based upon the behavioral and structural responses to coercive pressures, such as state requirements, as well as mimetic (imitation) and normative influences. The obligation of organisations to supply CSR funds to their stakeholders is an example of a regulatory coercive isomorphism imposed by the government (Muthuri & Gilbert, 2011; Kumar, 2016). Furthermore, the Institutional Theory indicates that organisations can present a formal structure that meets the expectations of society without necessarily having changed their operating practices. Meyer & Rowan (1977) and Bromley & Powell (2012) describe this phenomenon as decoupling. The CSR obligations in India can include allocations being diverted toward activities on the far reach of CSR law rather than being used to address the real developmental issues within the community (Arora & Puranik, 2004; Marquis & Raynard, 2015).

The theoretical understanding of the theory confirms that regulatory coercion is necessary, however it is not enough to achieve a developmental outcome. Transitioning from mere decoupling compliance with the CSR obligations to true engagement with stakeholders necessitates that organisations internalise the institutional norms with respect to the community in order to achieve visible social impacts. As previously discussed by various studies (previous slides), generalisation of the majority of published research on CSR and community engagement may be difficult due to the majority of studies only being based on firm-level determinants of CSR and thus failing to examine the systemic outcomes that may result from CSR engagement.

2.3 Creating Shared Value and Strategic Integration

Competitive advantage and social progress are not necessarily mutually exclusive; Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that through reconceptualising value chains, cluster development and expanding local markets, competitive advantage can increase social progress. As Porter et al. (2011) point out, Creating Shared Value or CSV is a new strategic direction for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) scholarship. The discourse has now shifted from giving back to creating value through addressing societal needs. In India, CSV, or Creating Shared Value, is a very useful framework for understanding the relationship between CSR and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, investments made in rural healthcare (SDG 3) or workforce skill development (SDG 4) increase work productivity and expand consumer markets, while simultaneously providing businesses with a social license to operate.

However, critics of CSV have indicated that CSV is biased towards economically viable social issues and does not fully address the structural inequities associated with social problems that may not directly produce a return on investment (Crane et al., 2014; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Therefore, creating shared value or CSV, must also create institutional mechanisms which will force businesses to pay attention to marginalised populations, and environmental externalities. Current definitions do not provide solutions for the conflicting interests of businesses that want to create value while having an ethical obligation to deal with systemic deprivation.

2.4 The Sustainable Development Goals as a Governance Architecture

As a meta-governance framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a new perspective on corporate sustainability that breaks down the traditional corporate sustainability "silos" seen with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Compared to the MDGs, which focused solely on developing countries, the SDGs are a universal call to action for all countries and industries (Hák et al., 2016; Sachs, 2012). Companies can create a shared framework for describing their social contributions, as well as a clear means of reporting how their efforts benefit the SDG. It should be noted, however, that the SDG framework has a systemic nature of goal interdependence, meaning that to advance one goal, we typically need to advance goals from multiple SDGs (Nilsson et al., 2018). As such, CSR must take a holistic view of the SDGs rather than take the piecemeal approach that is often observed in the process of meeting regulatory requirements associated with Schedule VII (in which companies select activities based more on convenience than on development logic).

Recent studies have shown that the relationship between companies' corporate social investments (CSI) and advancement of the SDGs is far more complex than previously thought to be. Increasingly, research is demonstrating that institutional context is a primary factor in mediating the relationship between CSI and advancement of the SDGs (Montiel et al., 2021; van Tulder et al., 2021). However, to date, there has yet to be an agreement on what constitutes best practices for aligning CSR with SDGs in developing economies, nor can there be agreement about the impact of institutional mechanisms.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

The above-mentioned theoretical perspectives suggest that CSR is effective when it is influenced by a combination of many factors; these include Institutional Pressures, Stakeholder Relationships and Strategic Orientations. However, how these multiple influences may come together to create transformational results in Emerging Markets that have enforced CSR legislation has not been determined. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap in knowledge by developing a Configurational Model which will combine these multiple perspectives into one unified explanation.

3. The Strategic CSR-SDG Alignment Model (SCSAM)

To demonstrate how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can contribute more than just meeting the legal requirement of compliance with statutory obligations towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there must first be an appropriate Conceptual Model. As CSR's success will depend on several conditions (i.e., institutions, governance, and measurement), we need a systematic means for capturing the relationship between these elements. The Strategic CSR - SDG Alignment Model serves as an overall integration of these elements (inputs) into the desired SDG-linked developmental outcomes (outputs).

3.1 Conceptual Architecture

Based on the previous theoretical foundations, we suggest the Strategic CSR-SDG Alignment Model (SCSAM) for research purposes. The SCSAM has three interrelated constructs: Institutional

Embeddedness; Stakeholder Co-Governance; Impact Measurement. The conceptual structure of SCSAM is illustrated in Figure 1.

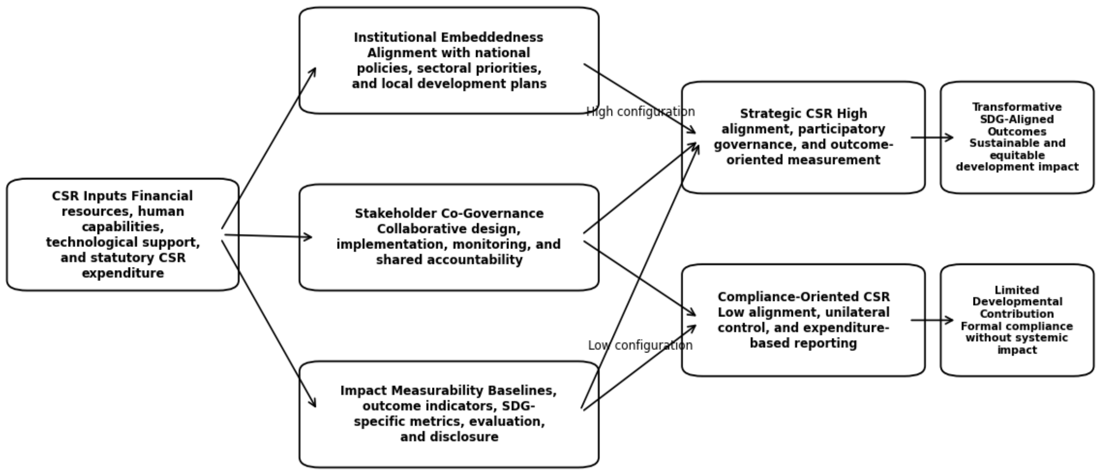

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Strategic CSR–SDG Alignment Model

CSR Inputs consist of the financial, human, and technological resources provided by corporations for CSR through required or optional contributions to society. Three mechanisms through which these inputs are delivered include:

1. Institutional Embeddedness: The extent to which CSR initiatives are connected to the various levels of policy in place (national, sectoral/local) as they relate to the SDG agenda and how they relate to local governments' development plans for India as identified by the government of India's NITI Aayog, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Skill India, and Digital India initiatives.

2. Stakeholder Co-Governance: The level of interaction between corporations and non-corporate entities (government agencies, civil society organisations, and communities) in developing and executing CSR initiatives. Co-Governance involves stakeholders collectively determining the outcomes of a CSR initiative, including sharing leadership responsibilities and strategies.

3. Impact Measurability: The extent to which robust metrics, measurement systems, and evaluations are in place for assessing CSR initiatives' impact on specific SDG targets, using performance indicators (lives improved, skills developed, reduced emissions) instead of input indicators (dollars spent).

The CSR Model further differentiates between compliance-oriented CSR and strategic CSR; compliance-oriented CSR usually has a low level of Embeddedness, unilateral control by corporations, and input measurement, while strategic CSR typically has a high level of Embeddedness, multistakeholder control, and outcome measurement. The definitions of compliance-oriented CSR and Strategic CSR and the operational Characteristics of each are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions, Operational Dimensions, and Theoretical Anchors of SCSAM Constructs

Construct	Definition	Operational Dimensions	Theoretical Anchor
Institutional Embeddedness	The extent to which CSR activities are integrated with national policy frameworks, sectoral priorities, and local institutional contexts.	Alignment with NITI Aayog SDG India Index; mapping to flagship schemes such as Swachh Bharat, Skill India, and Digital India; coherence with district-level development plans; coordination with sectoral ministries.	Institutional Theory: DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014
Stakeholder Co-	The extent to which	Participation of government	Stakeholder

Governance	corporate CSR initiatives are designed, implemented, and monitored through collaborative arrangements involving multiple actors.	agencies; involvement of civil society organisations; representation of beneficiary communities; engagement of academic and technical partners; shared decision-making protocols.	Theory: Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995
Impact Measurability	The availability and use of robust metrics, baselines, and evaluation frameworks to assess CSR contributions to SDG targets.	Use of outcome indicators rather than input indicators; baseline establishment and tracking; SDG target-specific metrics; third-party evaluation; public disclosure and transparency.	Creating Shared Value: Porter & Kramer, 2011; SDG Indicator Framework
Compliance-Oriented CSR	A low-alignment CSR mode characterised by limited institutional integration, unilateral corporate control, and input-based reporting.	Schedule VII box-ticking; peripheral activity selection; minimal stakeholder engagement; expenditure-focused reporting.	Institutional Decoupling: Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012
Strategic CSR	A high-alignment CSR mode characterised by deep institutional integration, multi-stakeholder governance, and outcome-oriented measurement.	Use of theory-of-change frameworks; participatory monitoring; developmental outcome tracking; cross-sectoral partnership.	Creating Shared Value: Porter & Kramer, 2011

3.2 Theoretical Propositions

The following proposals arise from the SCSAM:

Proposition 1: Higher levels of institutional embeddedness will lead to a greater developmental effect of corporate CSR as measured against the national/sub-national development frameworks

Rationale: The link between corporate CSR interventions and governmental programmes (including NITI Aayog's SDG India Index) provides for synergies between the two and reduces the risk of duplication in delivering services. By embedding CSR in the institutional landscape, corporate CSR interventions will respond to local needs rather than relying on general, globally portable interventions.

Proposition 2: The likelihood of decoupling between corporate CSR expenditure and development outcomes decreases with higher levels of embeddedness into the institutional landscape.

Rationale: CSR interventions that are embedded in their context will be subject to scrutiny from the community, government oversight, and policy coherence; narrowing the gap between what corporations commit to and how they operate.

Proposition 3: Stakeholder Co-Governing of CSR initiatives increases their legitimacy and capacity for sustainability compared to unilateral corporate governance.

Rationale: Co-Governed CSR incorporates local knowledge, creates shared accountability, and counteracts the "expertise bias" that results from corporate-led development initiatives. Participation of civil society in CSR initiatives adds a voice to the marginalised in design.

Proposition 4: The positive relationship between investment in CSR and advancing the SDGs is moderated by the quality of stakeholder Co-Governance. When the governance structure is inclusive (Participatory) the relationship is amplified.

Rationale: Inclusive governance processes connect the community-defined priorities with corporate resources, increasing the grounding and hence the uptake of CSR initiatives.

Proposition 5: The transition from a compliance-based to a strategy-based CSR depends on the presence of some form of measurable outcome.

Rationale: CSR is measured by expenditure, so without a measurable outcome, it exists in a constrained input-based rationale. The ability to measure and monitor enables an adaptive management process and the potential for continuous improvement.

Proposition 6: A multiplicative effect of stakeholder Co-Governance and CSR impact measurability on CSR effectiveness can be established where the combined effects of both constructs exceed their separate additive contributions.

Rationale: By incorporating civil society and the local community into the design and collection of the data used to evaluate CSR impact, measurement becomes a means of empowering rather than exercising control, thereby increasing both accountability and adaptive capacity.ss

Proposition 7: The presence of regulatory CSR requirements in emerging economies with strong state regulatory capacities establishes a "floor" of corporate engagement with an expectation of meeting the minimum level of compliance, while the potential for transformative CSR will be shaped by the relationship between embeddedness, co-governance, and measurability.

Rationale: Regulatory mandates establish a minimum level of corporate compliance, while the potential for transformative CSR relies on additional due diligence and voluntary strategic commitments by corporations at the local level.

4. Discussion

This section outlines the theoretical implications of the Strategic CSR-SDG Alignment Model, including CSR research, aligning with the SDGs and CSR in emerging markets. This framework extends the analysis of CSR beyond compliance, expenditure, and reporting at the firm-level to also include CSR's effectiveness as a final configuration of institutionally embeddedness, Stakeholder Co-Governance and Impact Measurability. The Strategic CSR-SDG Alignment Model provides a more theoretical understanding of how making a difference through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can create transformative development value.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

The CSR literature is expanded in three primary ways through the Stages of Corporate Social Advocacy Model (SCSAM). First, it integrates multiple theoretical streams that were previously not aligned – Institutional Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Shared Value Theory – into one cohesive explanatory model. Each of these theories separately provides some insight into CSR; however, their integration helps illuminate the configurational nature of CSR effectiveness – no one condition is sufficient to create an effective CSR outcome but rather specific combinations of conditions create significant CSR effectiveness.

The model continues to advance the emerging literature related to business and the SDG by moving from merely descriptive mapping of corporate contributions to individual SDG Goal(s) to creating an explanatory theoretical framework for why some of those corporate contributions generate systemic impact and others dissipate – the focus on interdependencies of SDG Goals and institutional embeddedness of those goal(s) represents a major gap in the current literature related to Corporate Sustainability.

Finally, the model reflects the importance of the host country context in which companies operate; as exemplified by India, the effectiveness of CSR is not only a function of the will of a corporation to engage in socially responsible behavior or the availability of resources; rather, the effectiveness of CSR is greatly determined by the vibrancy of civil society, the capacity of the state, and the characteristics of local institutional ecologies; all of which bring into question the universalist assumptions held by much of the western CSR literature.

4.2 The ESG Imperative and Accountability

The shift from CSR to ESG frameworks reflects a substantial change in corporate accountability. While CSR is limited to voluntary social expenditures, the ESG approach incorporates sustainability into an organisations business strategy, risk management, and capital investment (Gillan et al., 2021). The SCSAM states that ESG maturity is considered the final stage of strategic corporate social responsibility; as soon as social investments are integrated within an organisation, co-governed, and measurable, they stop being peripheral expenditure and become part of the value creation process and mechanisms for mitigating risk.

In India, the announcement of BRSR (business responsibility and sustainability reporting) by SEBI (the Securities and exchange board of India) marks this change. However, according to SCSAM, the effectiveness of BRSR will depend on whether the disclosure requirements are matched with processes to embed and co-govern the activities being reported. If the disclosure process does not include stakeholder engagement, it may become a higher level of decoupling from business-as-usual behaviours.

4.3 Policy Implications

According to the Strategic CSR–SDG Alignment Model, policymakers should take CSR regulation beyond a limited focus on expenditures and develop broader institutional architecture-building. In order to accomplish this, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs should establish clear alignment mechanisms through which companies can receive mapping guidelines for their CSR and SDG efforts. The purpose of the mapping guidelines is to assist businesses in selecting CSR activities that are highly aligned with national development priorities and that have the most significant developmental impact. By targeting CSR resources to support public policy, the private sector can help improve progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

The model also identifies issues relating to platform governance and defining outcome measures. The Government should facilitate the creation of multi-stakeholder platforms at both the district and state levels to coordinate on CSR initiatives, reduce redundancy, and include community representatives that will benefit from CSR activities. The Government should work with NITI Aayog, sector ministries, and civil society organisations to develop standardised CSR metrics; this will allow CSR measurement to move beyond input metrics (i.e., total funding) to outcome metrics (i.e., improved, trained, reduced emissions, and progressed against SDG objectives).

4.4 Managerial Implications

To operate under an ethical and socially responsible paradigm, firms need to develop their capability to engage collaboratively through strategic partnerships (e.g., with government, NGOs, and community institutions) rather than via philanthropy, creating strategic alignment between the SDGs and their respective capabilities (i.e. engaging in materiality assessments).

To do this, corporate managers are required to develop partnership capabilities (i.e. ability to engage collaboratively), and to develop a robust theory of change and associated monitoring and evaluation systems. At the same time, corporate managers will be required to establish clear (measurable and achievable) links between their business (inputs) and the SDGs.

5. Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

The findings of this research are summarised in terms of their key contributions to theory, policy, and management. The Strategic CSR–SDG Alignment Model developed during the course of this research provides a structured way to think about enhancing CSR through its use as a viable vehicle for sustainable development beyond being just another compliance requirement. By including institutional embeddedness, stakeholder co-governance, and impact measurement, this study provides a configurational framework to help better understand how effective CSR can be in the Indian context.

5.1 Summary of Contributions

This article creates the Strategic CSR-SDG Alignment Model (SCSAM) to illustrate the conditions where corporate social responsibility can act as a transformative tool of national development in India. The model identifies institutional embeddedness, stakeholder co-governance and impact measurability as the key mediating mechanisms that convert CSR inputs into SDG aligned results. The article uses seven propositions to create an understanding of CSR effectiveness that goes beyond the compliance-strategy dichotomy.

The theoretical contribution synthesizes Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory and Shared Value into a framework for emerging markets that is sensitive to institutions. The practical contribution identifies the specific architectural conditions—policy alignment, participatory governance, outcome measurement—that can help elevate CSR from being a statutory expense to becoming a strategic development partner.

5.2 Limitations

This study, while exploratory in nature, provides some valuable insight into the CSR-SDG alignment.

The findings generated in this study are empirical validation of the propositions proposed; however, this will be conducted as a follow-up study. Theoretical synthesis has created the framework for the proposition (but not data collected from the sample), and therefore, the specific weighting of the three mediating constructs proposed are unknown until tested in further studies.

Also, the model was developed with the Indian context in mind, and its applicability to other developing countries having obligatory CSR will be tested.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Future studies need to empirically validate the SCSAM propositions using large scale quantitative data regarding Indian companies; by making comparative data collections across emergent economies with forms of mandatory CSR; and by providing qualitative case studies of firms that exemplify how to align CSR and SDG. Future studies should also be longitudinal in nature to investigate if the transition from CSR to ESG (exacerbated by regulatory changes such as the BRSR) enhances or diminishes the mediating structures presented in this study's model.

Additionally, further studies will be needed to determine if the configurational patterns from India carry over to other emerging economies with mandatory CSR. The theoretical framework established in the current research provides a vehicle for conducting this type of research, as it provides a robust contextually driven lens through which to examine one of the most important experiments in corporate accountability during the 21st century.

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