

A matter of balance?
The local institution as key player in the diffusion of CSR practices
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Although the stakeholder concept has become an obligatory point of passage in the CSR discourse, it remains ambiguous and contested on both theoretical and practical grounds. Some of the controversy around the stakeholder model concerns the interests public institutions have as a stakeholder of corporate action and, in particular, their importance for increasing the quantity and quality of sustainable practices in business. From the latter standpoint, it is possible to single out two divergent routes that have been proposed in order to foster the engagement of companies in social issues through public policy: a) the “business-case perspective”, depicting and encouraging the uptake of CSR as primarily a strategic choice and opportunity for firms in their search for competitive advantage; b) the “irresponsible-enterprise perspective”, according to which public regulation aimed at restricting the voluntarism entailed by usual conceptions of CSR would provide the most suitable way of coping with some structural determinants of social indifference in corporate behaviour.

Albeit modestly, the paper intends to contribute to this debate by dwelling on the distinctive roles that public institutions at the local level (incidentally, where firms are best placed to act as responsible members of a community) may play as co-producers of CSR endeavours. To this aim, it draws on the insights stemming from a recent research project carried out in an Italian district and focused on the CSR practices – and dilemmas – of a set of local small and medium-sized enterprises. The emerging picture suggests that the role of local authorities as key players in the promotion of business commitment to sustainability would involve, taken as a whole, a capacity of equilibrium: for instance, in orienting business solutions without imposing them; in supporting firms without taking over their CSR investments; in identifying and proposing guidelines without pursuing a homologising standardisation; in encouraging the adoption of structural CSR tools without fostering isomorphic formal ceremonialism. Above all, though, the peculiarity of this balanced approach would lie in the capacity to achieve a twofold integration. The first consists of addressing both enterprises and citizens as relevant audiences of institutional messages or initiatives regarding CSR, which is in line with what still appears to many as being at the heart of the public sphere’s “mission”, i.e. building bridges between different areas of collective life. Secondly, emphasis should be placed on the necessity of crafting public policies of CSR promotion by the inclusion of both technical channels, tailored to the practical needs of companies and consumers, and a cultural/educational agenda, aimed at raising communities and businesses’ awareness of sustainability issues.

Seemingly, the development of this prospective and potential profile for the local institution might represent a step towards, on one side, the pursuit of sustainability as a participated effort and, on the other, the overcoming of the dichotomy between strictly regulative and business-oriented approaches to the meaning and function of public action in the CSR field.