

# Corporate social responsibility practices of organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic in Azerbaijan



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*JEL code M140*

## Abstract

Taking part in strategic management and affecting organizations' competitiveness is one of the factors of CSR that needs to be highly emphasized. Social behavior of organizations has been identified as one of the urgent issues, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affects all countries of the world. The article mostly aims at investigating the CSR activities of enterprises over the period of COVID-19 pandemic. First and foremost, the attention is paid to conducting both theoretical and systematical investigation of CSR and strategic CSR, while later, the CSR activities were explored in diverse international and local Azerbaijan organizations during the pandemic period. The considerable technique for this research was looking through "case study". The implementation of CSR activities by enterprises in order to solve the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has been noticed. Furthermore, the engagement of business entities in CSR activities or giving donations related to their fields of activities has been experienced, as well. The final conclusion of the research is, "enterprises keep up applying CSR activities to the fields during the COVID-19 pandemic and accept the role of CSR activities as one of the strategic tools to increase their corporate image. After the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be beneficial for businesses to continue their CSR activities for both social and business purposes".

**Key words:** Corporate Social Responsibility, COVID-19, welfare

## Introduction

December, 2019, the hazardous disease Covid-19 started in China and quickly spread all over the world. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 epidemic a public health emergency of international concern. Since the Covid-19 pandemic has had not only social, but also political and cultural influence in our lives, in order to reduce the spread of the Pandemic, a couple of rules have been implemented by several countries, such as, quarantine and social distancing. According to those measurements, people were expected to stay home and enterprises were supposed to stop operating (Metwally et al., 2020: 2).

**Corporate Social Responsibility** – is defined as the implementation of activities in accordance with the needs and expectations of all interested parties of enterprises. Taking into account that with the Covid-19 pandemic the whole society faced quite substantial issues. Thus, one of the most crucial one was the provision of materials and equipment in the sphere of healthcare. In addition to that, regarding the implementation of the quarantine, a couple of severe problems appeared, like, distance education, psychological issues, nutrition and the like. Seems like, in order to find solutions to the problems, especially to the ones that were related to the pandemic, CSR activities have been actively applied. Furthermore, enterprises seem to have carried out the CSR activities either in parallel with their fields of activity or by making donations.

The expectations of both consumers and the whole society regarding the CSR activities of enterprises were getting higher and higher. Being aware of the expectations, enterprises demonstrated a strategic

approach over the period of the Pandemic period and focused on carrying out CSR activities in this direction. Firms appeared to make efforts to positively improve their corporate image and perceptions through CSR activities. According to Wildowicz-Giegiel (2014: 97), the idea of Corporate Social Responsibility holds up more importance globally. In the context of social issues, businesses must take responsibility for their activities that affect society and the environment. Yet, during the Pandemic, CSR activities seem to be carried out more for the effects of the Pandemic.

Hemingway (2005: 233) claims that apart from economic reasons, Corporate Social Responsibility emerges in parallel with the values of individuals and enterprises. Although the CSR activity of enterprises is aimed at solving the problems caused by the pandemic during the pandemic, it should continue to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic even after the pandemic.

During the period of the worldwide Pandemic a couple of international organizations, such as, PepsiCo, Bank of America, IKEA, The Fund of LEGO, Google and some local Azerbaijani organizations, like, Pasha Holding, Gilan Holding, Azercell, Bakcell were picked as an example in the research that was conducted on Corporate Social Responsibility activities. While conducting inquiry into the pandemic period and the CSR activities of these enterprises, the initially examined main spheres were conceptual framework CSR, strategic CSR, Covid-19 pandemic and Corporate Social Responsibility issues. The next step was to select the research method. In the following section, the performed analysis and the obtained results have been clarified. In the conclusion, all the acquired consequences of the research have been indicated.

### **CSR and Strategic CSR**

Recent social changes have made the concept of social responsibility become one of the issues emphasized by companies in a great number of parts of the world. As this concept has gradually become a necessity in the business world, various definitions have been given which take up a very important place in the literature. Despite the fact that, the concept of corporate social responsibility is not a newly discovered term, there is increasing interest in it. This growth gives us a chance to observe several various definitions in the literature.

Corporate social responsibility is defined as acting not only to make a profit, but also to fulfill its obligations to society (Carroll 1979: 497). According to Theaker (2008), corporate social responsibility is activities aimed at serving the interests of the society in which the company is located, rather than only looking after its own interests. On the other hand, Peltekoglu (2001) defines corporate social responsibility as the obligation of decision-makers to take actions that protect and improve the welfare of society in addition to their own interests.

Another definition determines corporate social responsibility as the integration of social and environmental values within the enterprise's core business activities and relationships with its stakeholders with the aim of ensuring the well-being of society (O'Riordan and Fairbrass 2008: 747). Both Seeger and Hipfel (2007: 156) argue that, corporate social responsibility means participating in certain social values and issues in accordance with limited philanthropic activities. However L'Etang (1994: 117) defines the concept of corporate social responsibility as the set of activities that the company must carry out in accordance with a certain concept of duties and obligations. Repka (2004: 3), looking at the concept of corporate social responsibility from a slightly different perspective, defines it as a company's commitment to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of its employees and families, the environment and society.

According to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, corporate social responsibility is the ongoing commitment of the business community to improve the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as the local community by acting ethically and contributing to economic development. It is also necessary for the long-term prosperity of business (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2020: 7-8). This brings with it not only economic responsibilities, but also responsibilities that include social, environmental and ethical responsibilities to members of society inside and outside the organization. Therefore, the basic idea of corporate social responsibility is that businesses have an obligation/responsibility for their impact on society and the natural environment, beyond compliance with the law and the responsibility of individuals (Ayalew, 2018: 157-158).

The following three essential approaches leave a worthwhile influence both on the public and the growth of businesses. Those approaches are: a) welfare of the workforce, b) humanitarianism and society development, c) CSR strategy. Among them the first two of them are considered as conventional CSR. The traditional CSR activities, especially the ones that can enclose humanitarianism and society development are mainly considered distinctive and unassociated with business operations.

Unfortunately, while business might own a CSR program in the spheres of education and healthcare, they can be observed polluting the environment and demonstrating unfair treatment towards the labor force. So, the main objective of strategic CSR is to find solutions to the issues, although, the strategic CSR aims at keeping the business strategy and necessities of the society as main factors. In a nutshell, the traditional and strategic CSR are distinguished in terms of stimulation, implementation and impact (Werner, W. 2009).

Porter and Kramer observed in a recent Harvard Business Review article that though organizations have increased their emphasis on CSR, these activities are usually not connected to the organization's business strategy. The result is suboptimal economic or social impacts. When conducted with no clear strategic framework, CSR practice often results in a poor hodgepodge of uncoordinated CSR and philanthropic activities, disconnected from the company's strategy which neither makes any meaningful social impact nor strengthens the firm's long-term competitiveness. Porter and Kramer contend that organizations often develop CSR programs based on doing something good, creating programs in a reactive manner in response to external pressures from society, enacting activities that are aimed solely at public relations, or gaining a positive score on CSR scorecards which ultimately failed to connect CSR activities to their core business strategy (Milliman et al. 2008). In addition to the fundamental debate about CSR's relationship to the firm's bottom line, Porter argue that CSR requires a major focus, using a strategic analytic approach rather than reaction to outside pressures or good intentions. Using the same value chain, he proposed to map corporate strategy, and then propose the value chain that can identify the positive or negative social consequences of all a firm's activities. (Gill, S. 2007)

Corporations face an increasingly competitive and globalized environment where business activities and perceptions are placed under escalating scrutiny. CSR will only enhance a company's reputation or access to capital if the public is convinced that they really are having a positive impact on society.

The observation carried out by Porter and Kramer claims that although the organizations pay more attention to CSR, the organizations' business strategy appears not to be related to any of those activities. Yet, the outcome is either suboptimal economic or social influences. Being applied without any strategic structure result in very weak disconnected CSR and charity activities. In addition to that, the CSR practice ends up being detached from the strategy of the company, thus, this does not lead to either influence socially or reinforce the company's long-term competitiveness. Porter and Kramer argue that firms usually tend to improve the very CSR programs that are aimed at getting positive results. Besides, organizations tend to create programs to avoid outer influences from the public, accomplish activities based on only social relations (Milliman et al.2008). Apart from the basic debate related to CSR's relationship the profit of firms, Porter strongly claims that, the main requirement of CSR is to utilize a strategic analytical method instead of reacting to external pressures. So, he suggested creating the map of the corporate strategy and also the worthy chain that is able to point out both positive and negative results of applied activities by firms (Gill, S. 2007).

Currently, the incredibly increasing competitive and developed atmosphere has become danger for business activities and perceptivities. In case that the society is persuaded that the CSR activities are truly beneficial for the public, only in that case CSR will be able to intensify the fame of the company or access to the funds.

As, the conceptualization of "strategic CSR" has been approved by a number of authors, it is clearly observed that, this concept turns out to be quite beneficial for firms. As long as being valuable, this case ensures a chance to be able to appraise the values of CSR in a wider concept rather than in ordinary association between charity contributions and gain. So, in conclusion, the latest written works related to the business and society sphere focus on taking a more strategic direction to elements of CSR both unquestioningly and clearly (Burke, L et al.1996).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic and Corporate Social Responsibility**

In today's competitive environment, the number of enterprises that make CSR activities an important part of their business is increasing day by day. CSR serves as an effective marketing tool in developing a brand image by creating a competitive advantage for a business. Businesses stand out from their competitors with the solutions they bring to social problems and are more likely to be chosen by consumers. Unforeseen circumstances, especially the ones that deeply affect society, affect the communication strategies of brands, as well. Thus, during that period, consumers' expectations of voluntary responsibility from brands get higher. The worldwide Covid-19 epidemic has been one of the rare crises in world history

so far. Thus, the Covid-19 Pandemic has caused serious damage to both people and industries at the same time and has disrupted economies.

The Covid-19 Crisis has become an economic and labor market shock affecting not only the production of goods and services, but also expenditure and investment consumption. The Covid-19 Pandemic has had a wide impact on the labor market. In addition to concerns about the health of workers and their families, the virus and subsequent economic shocks are affecting the business world in three key dimensions: 1) The amount of jobs (both unemployment and full employment); 2) Quality of work (wages and access to social protection) and 3) Effects on certain groups that are more vulnerable to negative labor market outcomes (ILO, 2020: 2-3).

Corporate Social Responsibility - the consistent commitment of companies to ethical practices, economic development, and improving the quality of life of employees and society as a whole. CSR mainly reflects the roles and functions of companies as market and legal agents in society, their relationship with society and their contribution to society and their impact on society (Zhang et al., 2021: 234).

The Covid-19 Pandemic represents one of the most significant environmental changes in modern times that could potentially have a profound impact on Corporate Social Responsibility activities (He and Harris, 2020: 176-177). CSR has significant power to shape policy, benefit workers and society, and develop products of global shared value. (Popkova et al., 2021: 2). Therefore, during the pandemic, this important force was expected to play an important role in solving the problems arising from the pandemic through social projects and campaigns.

CSR is a common strategic tool and management practice adopted by companies in crisis situations (Zhang et al., 2021: 233). The Covid-19 Pandemic is also an important crisis and offers opportunities for companies to contribute to society and promote themselves by producing social responsibility projects that align with their values. For this reason, during the Covid-19 Pandemic, the implementation of social campaigns in various areas such as the distribution of food, clothing, personal protective equipment and medicines needed in society and especially in some specific groups such as 65-year-old citizens has increased people's behavior and social awareness (Severo et al., 2021).

CSR has become a strategic tool to maintain competitive advantage, enhance brand reputation, and promote employee corporate citizenship behavior (Zhang et al., 2021: 233). Therefore, providing information about the Corporate Social Responsibility activities of enterprises through social media during the pandemic can contribute to the improvement of their corporate image and performance (Liu et al., 2020: 1).

### **CSR in International Organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Although on the one hand the Covid-19 pandemic has presented great possibilities for companies, on the other hand, this case has led to the shutdown of several companies. Yet, the risk of bankruptcy for several organizations was inevitable, as well. Since, the organizations faced the limitation of resources and the fear of survival, they did not find implementation of CSR activities so easy (He and Harris, 2020: 177). For this reason, the vital problems experienced by some enterprises during the Covid-19 Pandemic conflicted with the concept of CSR, which was considered crucial for their competitive advantage, survival and sustainability (Hejase, 2020)

Quite a lot of difficulties were experienced throughout the period of Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, several companies or retailers have been observed taking advantage of the crisis, though. Like, some companies, in the UK, made some efforts to gain benefits from the case of pandemic by inflating prices or making misleading claims, hence, all these ended up affecting CSR activities negatively (He and Harris, 2020: 177).

The way more considerable factor exerting influence on the CSR activities during the pandemic is definitely owning a superior management team. For example, in spite of owning the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation, the co-founder of Alibaba Jack Ma has donated coronavirus test kits and other medical supplies to many countries. Apart from that, the CEO and founder of Twitter, the owner of Microsoft Companies Bill Gates can be mentioned as well. Thus, the founder of Twitter Jack Dorsey has donated \$ 1 billion to efforts to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and Bill Gates encouraged global cooperation to fight the pandemic. So, last but not least, senior leaders of enterprises had a significant influence on CSR activities and successfully directed CSR activities during the period of Pandemic (He and Harris, 2020: 177). The co-founder of Twitter, Jack Dorsey made \$ 1 billion dollar donation to the affected by Coronavirus.

**PepsiCo**, a World Economic Forum Strategic Partner and member of the COVID-19 Action Platform, has directed a \$45 million COVID-19 response initiative to communities most affected by the pandemic. **Airbnb** announced \$250 million in coronavirus relief for hosts. **Bank of America** has offered aid to highly

qualified consumer and small business customers experiencing difficulties. And the CEO of Bank of America donated \$100 million to support communities affected by the pandemic. **Allianz Global Assistance** has temporarily enabled travelers to submit medical and cancellation requests that are not normally processed due to Covid-19. **Walmart, Target, CVS, Walgreens** have started running speed testing. **IKEA** demonstrates aid to locate hospitals in the affected areas. The supermarket in the UK named **Morrisons** has set up a Hardship Fund that aims at helping the employees who face difficulties due to the virus. **The Berlin Messe Trade Fair Exhibition Ground** has been transformed into a 1,000-bed coronavirus hospital. **The LEGO Foundation** has donated \$50 million to support children, especially in areas most affected by COVID-19.

In addition, a free website has been created to help children continue their education from home without interruption and to ease the burden of stay-at-home parents.

With an investment of \$800 million, **Google** made its video conferencing service Hangouts Meet available to all G-suite customers by July 1, 2020. **Unilever** delivered \$100 million worth of cleaning supplies to the most needy regions of the world. **P&G** started producing 45,000 liters of hand sanitizer per week. **Pernod Ricard SA** produced 1,000 gallons of hand sanitizer.

**The Alibaba** co-founder has gone beyond his \$14 million pledge to help develop a Covid-19 vaccine: he founded Global MediXchange to Fight COVID-19 to help doctors share best practices around the world during the pandemic. It also launched a talent exchange scheme for those working in industries most affected by the pandemic and losing their jobs in the process.

#### **The CSR Activities and fight against Covid-19 in Azerbaijan**

In the early days of the pandemic, Azerbaijan set an exemplary model in the fight against the global pandemic. The policy that was applied by Azerbaijan has fully justified itself not only in the country but also overseas, and the global challenges put forward by our head of state have been supported at a high level by the leaders of the world countries and governments, and important steps have been taken in this direction. The measurements that have been applied by Azerbaijan include: creating modular hospitals, increasing the number of beds and machines at hospitals, creating face covering masks, alcohol and syringe production factories, taking steps against the increase in the unemployment rate of the population, applying concessions to entrepreneurs, organizing the vaccination process and the like. Thus, the policy implemented by Azerbaijan has been approved by WHO as one of the exemplary models.

On March 19, 2020, in regard with the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, one of the effective measures against Covid-19 was established, which is the creation of the Support Fund for the Fight against Coronavirus. The fund aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus infection and providing financial support for the measures taken to combat it. For the first time in the world, this sort of Fund was established in Azerbaijan. While, allocations from the state budget were made to the Fund, legal entities and individuals took active part in making donations. Apart from that, different state organizations, companies participated in this voluntary action. Thus, 3,395 legal entities and 12,532 individuals donated to the Support Fund for the fight against the coronavirus. In total, 114,268,840 million AZN were collected in the fund.

Like in the whole world, in Azerbaijan, the pandemic has had a strong impact on the socio-economic aspects of the life and activities of not only ordinary citizens, but also entrepreneurs. Yet, the SME sector was the one that was mostly affected by the coronavirus crisis. So, taking into account that factor, while a large number of companies tended to implement CSR activities, it turned out it was not quite easy, especially when the resources were quite limited. Among the companies that were implementing CSR activities, the large companies and holdings are particularly mentioned.

During the pandemic, the measures implemented by the companies covered both the external and internal environment. Companies have tried to protect their employees by implementing flexibility for remote work, fewer business trips, fewer physical meetings and greater use of IT capabilities. They have offered trainings to their employees related to safety guide against COVID-19. On the other hand, companies tried to support their external environment against the coronavirus either by making donations to the Support Fund for the fight against the coronavirus or implementing other projects. For instance, Central Bank, Premium Bank, AzerGold made huge amount of donations ranging from 500000 to 300000 AZN.

In the first days of the establishment of the Support Fund for the fight against the coronavirus, PASHA Holding and its subsidiary companies transferred 3.2 million manats to this fund. At the same time, on the initiative of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the holding companies financed the opening of 6 fully automated, fast and high-precision laboratories aimed at diagnosing the coronavirus. In addition, the companies that have been emphasized ensured the purchase of 170 ECMO and 10 high-value dialysis machines, the

strongest protective medical masks and protective medical clothing have been presented to medical workers respectively. In total, about 23 million manats were spent on these activities by the group of companies. At the same time, they also financed the installation of two modular hospitals, each with 200 beds, in order to have enough hospital beds. About 5 million AZN were spent on their construction. Furthermore, it has allocated hotels and facilities belonging to the group of companies free of charge for the separate accommodation of doctors working with patients and citizens in need of quarantine. Taking into account the number of rooms as essence, the largest hotel in Baku (Boulevard Hotel) and the hotel in Naftalan were presented for the accommodation of doctors and medical workers. Besides them, hotels in Siyazan (Galaalti Hotel & SPA), Lankaran (Lankaran Springs and Wellness Resort) and Shamakhi (Shamakhi Palace Sharadil) were allocated for the quarantined people. In all those facilities, the quarantined people were provided with three meals a day and all necessary daily consumption products. The stores belonging to the Bravo market chain also took all necessary measures to ensure the safety of both customers and company employees, since it was very important to prevent the spread of the virus. I would like to emphasize that foreign companies have mobilized all their efforts to support the governments of Turkey and Georgia, respectively. For example, PASHA Bank Turkey financed the production of protective masks for medical workers in Turkey in cooperation with local Turkish companies, and PASHA Bank Georgia provided funds for the protection of residents of Marneuli.

The employees of Gilan Holding visited 6,000 families, including families of martyrs, to lonely people over 65 years of age, low-income families, and delivered food products to them due to the special quarantine regime implemented as part of measures to combat the coronavirus infection. In order to ensure that Azercell subscribers belonging to the age group above 65 can use their services without leaving their homes, Azercell has made Mobile Customer Services free of charge for them, and has loaded a balance of 50 AZN to more than 600 medical workers who work day and night in various hospitals and quarantine centers.

Thanks to the initiative taken by Bakcell – “support for the uninterrupted continuation of education of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic”, 30 young people were able to continue their education online during the quarantine. For this purpose, SOS Children's Villages located in Baku and Ganja were equipped with the necessary number of computers and provided with fast internet connections. As a result, the education and attendance indicators of the youth under the organization's protection exceeded the indicators of the 2018/2019 academic year before the pandemic.

## Conclusion

The article is divided into two categories: theoretical and practical. In addition to analyzing the new trends of strategic CSR, which are becoming more relevant day by day, we also investigated the CSR activities of companies in the pandemic with various international and local cases. The coronavirus pandemic has been a formative event affecting our lives and ways of thinking. Organizations and enterprises have allocated efforts and resources to cope with the consequences of the pandemic, following the concept of social responsibility within society. The sheer scale of CSR allows us to sharpen our understanding and thinking about the best ways firms should plan and implement their social responsibility in the face of a major world crisis.

As a result of this, it was observed that during the pandemic, entrepreneurial subjects carried out their CSR activities especially in the direction of solving the problems arising from the pandemic and more in parallel with their own fields of activity. Seems that enterprises take a strategic approach to CSR activities and carry out activities that meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders, thereby contributes positively to the development of corporate image. Last but not least, businesses should continue to contribute to all stakeholders by continuing their CSR activities after the pandemic.

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