Vertical relationships as arenas for joint CSR practices

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ABSTRACT

Our purpose in this paper is to work on the links between vertical relationships (here between a focal company and their suppliers) and *joint* Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices. If we consider that vertical relationships where collaboration already exists are possible arenas for the development of joint CSR practices, we wonder whether such joint initiatives are a way for the focal company to reinforce its role within its ecosystem and whether it really does positively influence the business relationships. We also investigate the limits of intertwining business and social relationships.

Our main findings show that our first hypothesis will vary according to the size and power of the customer company: joint social initiatives may prove to be as adversarial as business, when power is relatively balanced between two major customers and suppliers, whereas it will be more easily developed with smaller suppliers in an asymmetric power position. The social arena will help to develop the level of trust and operational fit between these actors, which bears out the hypothesis that joint social initiatives may reinforce the customer's ecosystem and offer new business opportunities to their small or medium-sized suppliers. Such initiatives nevertheless remain uncommon when the focal company wants to take advantage of a favourable asymmetry of power.

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INTRODUCTION

CSR practices are those practices a company has to "*improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contribution of corporate resources*" (Kotler and Lee, 2004, p. 3), or, as Bhattacharya et al. (2009), formulate – in full consistency with Kotler and Lee's approach - a company can be considered having CSR practices when "*corporate resources (e.g. money, labour) are allocated to activities that are intended to improve societal welfare*" (Bhattacharya, Korschun & Sen, 2009, p. 260).

In this study we are focusing on joint CSR practices: we define them as CSR actions that are developed by two (or more) companies, which are involved, moreover, in a business relationship (for instance CSR projects developed by a company with one or more of its suppliers or customers). Joint CSR practices assume collaboration between involved parties (Peloza & Falkenberg, 2009; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

Previous academic research has demonstrated the interest for companies to collaborate with suppliers (Anderson et al.,1994; Biemans, & Brand, 1995, Jap, 1999; Kalwani & Narayandas, 1995; Sheth, 1996; Sheth and Sharma, 1997, Trent, 2005). Nevertheless, for many firms, "*power-dependency situations*" [are] "*perceived as problematic*" (Dubois & Pedersen, 2002, p. 41) leading them (particularly those that are using purchasing supplier portfolio models) to favour strategies where they "*exploit power*" or "*avoid risks associated with the supplier exercising power* » (Dubois & Pedersen, 2002, p. 41). Thus collaborative relationships, with what they imply in terms of mutual goals, mutual interdependence, openly shared information, a constructive problem solving approach, trust and commitment (Sriram, Krapfel & Speakman, 1992, p. 305) are not so easy to implement and the gap between the « *idealised depictions* » of collaborative relationships with suppliers and « *the reality on the ground* » (Storey, Amberson &Reade, 2005, p. 255) is sometimes very significant.

Within this background, it appears interesting to choose vertical relationships as specific places where CSR practices can appear and develop and to study how the business relationships and the CSR initiatives interact with each other.

Our research questions are the following: are such joint initiatives a way for the focal company to reinforce its role within its ecosystem? Does it positively influence the business relationships? We also investigate the limits of intertwining business and social relationships.

Our paper will be organized as follows. First, we will present CSR practices and particularly develop the notion of "joint CSR practices" that seems appropriate to analyse CSR practices in an "interactive" perspective. Then we will review notions that make it possible to link CSR practices to a "network" perspective: cross-sector social partnerships, stakeholder approaches, nets and ecosystems. A case of "joint CSR practices" is then presented between Air Fly[1] (a major airline company) and several of its suppliers: one key supplier (AMC – Airport Management Company) and several others less important ones. The case is used to discuss how the business relationship between Air Fly and its suppliers impacts on, and is impacted by, the joint CSR practices these actors have developed in addition. Different implications and future possible developments of this still on-going research work are then proposed.

[1] *Names of companies have been changed*

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Though works on CSR are abundant (Greenfield, 2004; Maignan and Ralston, 2002; McWilliams et al., 2006; Pearce and Doh, 2005) many authors emphasize the lack of a consistent definition of CSR (Lindgreen et al., 2008; Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). Carter & Jennings (2002) explain that CSR, from an academic perspective, has developed under the influence of many theories, such as agency theory, institutional theory, the resource-based view of the firm, stakeholder theory, stewardship theory, and the theory of the firm (for a review, see McWilliams et al., 2002), which result in numerous conceptualizations, but mostly embryonic ones (Lindgreen et al., 2008).

The European Commission (2001, p 8) has defined CSR as "*a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis*", but the academic literature lacks a widely recognised conceptual CSR definition.

It seems however that a broad agreement exists between scholars on the fact that companies that are involved in CSR practices create higher levels of trust and commitment whether they are customers or suppliers (Carter & Jennings, 2002) or any kind of stakeholder (Bhattacharya, Korschun & Sen, 2008 ; Porter & Kramer, 2006). But, at the same time, a lot of authors insist on the difficulty of CSR implementation within companies. For instance Yuan et al. (2011) state, "*integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in business is one of the great challenges facing firms today* » (Yuan, Bao & Verbeke, 2006, p. 75). The same for Bhattacharya, Korschun and Sen (2008), or Lindgreen et al. (2008) who consider that "*there is still little guidance as to how companies can implement CSR activity* ».

Recently, like an echo to the previous criticisms about the limited managerial dimension of CSR works, Rangan, Chase and Karim (2012) offered a pragmatic vision of the developing and evolutionary way companies practise CSR. Rangan et al. (2012) propose three "theatres" (considered as descriptive frameworks) among which CSR practices can be classified. First, CSR practices may focus on philanthropy and take the form of donations to corporate foundations. Second, CSR practices may aim as a priority at creating business opportunities and increasing profitability "*while also creating social and environmental benefits by reengineering the value chain*" (p. 7). Such practices are based on value-chain reengineering (upstream and downstream). Third, CSR practices may aim at transforming the business's ecosystem. In this case the company's priority is that of « *crafting a solution to a societal problem* » (p. 9), and the ROI only occurs in the longer term. The two last theatres (reengineering the value chain and "transforming the ecosystem") may refer to the concepts of "interaction" and "network" (Hakansson and Snehota, 1995). Nevertheless, if "interaction" and "networks" are now usual concepts when dealing with business-to-business exchanges, they are used far less systematically when it is CSR practices that are specifically concerned. Thus Selsky and Park (2011) write, "*the literature on cooperative strategy and social issues has developed relatively independently*" (Selsky & Parke, 2011, p. 23).

The question of how companies interact to develop CSR practices then remains an issue.

JOINT CSR PRACTICES AND CROSS-SECTOR SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS

We define joint CSR practices as CSR actions developed by two (or more) companies, which are involved, besides, in a business relationship (for instance CSR projects developed by a company with one or more of its suppliers or customers).

An interesting perspective for such "joint CSR practices" may be provided by the concept of CSSP (cross-sector social partnership) (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Selsky & Parker 2011) that has been developed to label those social activities that result from collaboration between several parties from different sectors. Cross-sector social partnerships are defined as *"partnerships among business, government, and civil society that address social issues and causes*" (Austin, 2000; Gray, 1989; Sternberg, 1993; Stone, 2000; Young, 1999). Waddock (1991) defines them as "*the voluntary collaborative efforts of actors from organizations in two or more economic sectors in a forum in which they cooperatively attempt to solve a problem or issue of mutual concern that is in some way identified with a public policy agenda item*" (Waddock, 1991, p 481-482 quoted by Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 850).

Though works on CSSP insist on the fact that those collaborations exist between actors from different sectors (mainly businesses, non-profit organizations and governments) several aspects of the CSSP corpus appear interesting relative to our purpose. This is particularly the case when identifying which variables can be considered when observing CSSP. Selsky and Parker (2005) identify 4 of these variables. CSSP may be analysed by looking at: 1/ how they are formed, what are the motivations of the parties forming them; 2/ how they are implemented (what are the « *governance, structure, and leadership characteristics, as well as behavioural dynamics such as culture, communication, and relationship development* » (Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 855); 3/ what their outcomes are including "*measurable project results and intangible outcomes such as system capacity for learning and change*" (Selsky and Parker, 2005, p. 855) and finally, 4/ what factors can influence the activities of a CSSP.

Another interesting aspect of the CSSP literature is the description of "platforms" (Selsky & Parker 2011), which can provide a possible basis for taxonomy of the joint CSR practices we are observing. For Selsky and Parker (2011) platforms are a means of reflecting on what a collaborative social project is, they are « *sense making devices that managers use to envision a partnership project, frame it, and make it meaningful and sensible* » (Selsky & Parker, 2011, p. 24). Selsky & Parker (2011) identify three types of platforms. In the *resource-dependence platform*, parties involved consider "*how collaborative engagements may help the organization address its own needs or solve problems it faces*" (Selsky and Parker, 2011, p. 26). The social-issue platform, this one assumes that the issue arises externally (Selsky and Parker, 2011, p. 27) and finally, in the societal platform, the collaborative project becomes a source of learning.

The CSSP platforms may apply to vertical relationships and the actors' willingness to solve common issues, such as employment issues on their territory.

CSR AND THE STAKEHOLDER THEORY

If little has been said so far on the link between "interaction processes" and CSR practices (opening on the possible interest of the notion of joint CSR practices), many scholars have already grounded their definition of CSR within the Stakeholder Theory, defining CSR as social accountability (Munilla and Miles, 2005). Munilla and Miles (2005) report on Perreault and McCarthy (2002) defining CSR as "… *a firm's obligation to improve its positive effects on society and reduce its negative effects*", or on van Marrewijk (2003, p 102), who states that (CSR) are "*company activities— voluntary by definition— demonstrating the inclusion of* *social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders*". This last definition (van Marrewijk, 2003) leads to a normative framework with a five-level continuum starting from compliance driven CSR initiatives to a holistic vision of CSR policy transforming the organisation. This relates to the normative dimension of the Stakeholder Theory, which identifies stakeholders by their "intrinsic value" (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). The other two dimensions of the Stakeholder Theory are the descriptive ones, presenting a corporation model as a constellation of cooperative and competitive interests and the instrumental one, linking stakeholder management to the performance of the firm.

Based on these three dimensions of the Stakeholder Theory, we can position CSR as a means of increasing the social value created by the corporation with different stakeholders, who are linked by the same social interests. Nevertheless, the Stakeholder model refers to a focal company with a network of stakeholders (refer to Figure 2 in Donaldson and Preston, 1995, p 69), whereas in our research, we are looking at what we call joint CSR practices, involving several firms and their (common) network of stakeholders.

CSR PRACTICES, NETS AND ECOSYSTEMS

The concept of business ecosystem (Heuer, 2011) was introduced almost 20 years ago by Moore (1993), incorporating an insight, developed in biology by Tansley (1935) and more recently by Gould (1997) in business to describe companies that "*work cooperatively and competitively to support new products, satisfy customer needs and eventually incorporate the next round of innovations*" (Moore, 1993, p 76).

What differentiates the concept of ecosystems from networks (Hakanson, 1982; Snehota and Hakanson, 1995) is mainly the fact that, according to Moore (1993), the ecosystem is steered by one or more "dominating" companies, that want to keep the leadership and control over the ecosystem (Mira-Bonnardel et al., 2012). Business ecosystems are "*intentional communities of economic actors*" (Moore, 2006, p. 33), with leaders establishing a "*community governance*" (Moore, 2006, p. 55).

Thus, ecosystems, because of this "intentionality" dimension display similarity with the "strategic nets" (or "value nets" or simply "nets") as described by Moller and Svahn (2003), Moller and Rajala (2007) Moller, Rajala and Svahn (2005). These authors define "nets" as "*intentionally formed networks that contain a finite set of parties* » (Moller et al, 2005, p. 1275). The authors distinguish between three types of nets representing « *different logic of value creation but also requiring different management mechanisms*" (Moller and Rajala, 2007, p. 898). "*Current Business Nets*" are stable nets where actors, activities, technologies and processes are well known. "*Business renewal nets*" are nets where, activities are modified (in a limited and local way) by actors forming the net to improve value systems. "*Emerging business nets*" are characterised by radical changes in value-systems.

Though emerging literature on nets is proving to be highly promising - particularly in terms of which managerial skills are to be developed to manage different types of nets – the literature on "business ecosystems" developing in parallel seems to provide additional insights into these "intentionality" dimensions. This is for instance the case with the importance given to the "community dimension" (co-vision, co-management, co-development) and "motivation" in ecosystems. As Moore (2006) explains, "leaders" in business ecosystems "co-envision and co-manage the co-evolution among members. These leaders establish what might be called "community governance" where "members find ways to rally around valuable and exciting futures" (Moore, 2006, p. 55). Obviously, such concepts appear of primary interest when dealing with CSR practices... Another interesting concept developed by Moore (2006) is the one of "space". Space is described by Moore (2006) as the "*concept of a future domain of business activity that may not exist today, or that exists only in a nascent form*" (Moore, 2006, p. 53). The author sees business ecosystems as a way of exploiting business opportunities linked to this concept of "space" (market or opportunity space) – which can be interrelated to the Blue Ocean Strategy: "create uncontested market space" (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005), but also to the notion of common "territory" (which is more relevant to our case study – see infra).

Koenig (2012), building on the works of Moore (2006), proposes a typology of business ecosystems. It is built on two dimensions: first, the degree of interdependence between members of the ecosystem and, second, the nature of the control over resources in the ecosystem (it is either centralized or decentralized). Four types of ecosystems are then identified: 1/ offering systems (subcontracting for instance); 2/ platforms (one actor gives other actors access to a resource, thus encouraging independent innovations); 3/ Common destiny communities (heterogeneous actors gather around an existential solidarity and the importance of gift) and 4/ "proliferation communities" (numerous actors gather around a resource that is considered a "common good" (for instance open source communities). In all cases, as Koenig (2012) stresses, these ecosystems only hold together because their members agree on a common project (Koenig, 2012, p. 219).

Thus, we looked for a business ecosystem in which companies had developed both business vertical relationships and joint social vertical relationships, so that we could answer our research questions on the interaction between business and social relationships and the limits of such initiatives.

One of the researchers had the opportunity of attending a training course organised by Air Fly (a major airline company) to improve knowledge of the airline sector. This was an opportunity to have a presentation of their CSR initiatives and to make contact with senior executives, which indeed was the starting point of our case study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The role of joint CSR initiatives is investigated in a real-world setting by means of a formal case study, following the classic methodology formalized by Mintzberg (1979) and Yin (2003). The study is grounded in the ecosystem of a focal company and is described hereafter. Some researchers might argue that a single case study "lacks rigor, comparability and replicability" (Barzelay, 1993, p. 305). However, Armato and Caren (2002) suggest that "*the single case is not so much a definitive proof, but an opportunity to explicate (a phenomenon)*"; a single case study may enable in-depth investigation and a rich description of a situation that does not specifically require a cross-case comparison (Darke *et al.*, 1998; Stake, 1994). Due to the lack of existing empirical work on which to position this research, it was decided to develop theory through an interpretive approach, using grounded theory (i.e. examining empirical data without a preconceived theory) (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). We built our framework from a managerial perspective, following the process described by Tuly et al. (2007) and Ulaga and Reinartz (2011).

The logical validity of this study is first founded on the researchers' multiple perspective, interviewing informants from different organizations within the ecosystem, i.e. informants with different perspectives, which is a way of reducing the bias linked with each perspective by triangulating the perceptions. Secondly, data were checked against secondary sources, such as sustainable reports, specialized press interviews or articles. Third, the logical validity of this study is also grounded in "logical coherence" (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), which is the appropriate matching between reality and theoretical constructs.

CASE STUDY

Our case study takes place within an airport platform, within the ecosystem built around the focal company, Air Fly (AF), a major airline company (with revenues of 24 billion € and almost 100 000 employees in 2011). Next to Air Fly, we find Airport Management Company (AMC), which owns and operates some major airports (with revenues of 2.5 billion € and 9500 employees) and a network of suppliers and subcontractors (runways maintenance, baggage handling, security, food catering, etc.).

The relationship between Air Fly and AMC has always been troublesome, Air Fly being the "captive" customer for AMC, which is in a situation of "monopolistic" supplier. Their economic interests are convergent at the macro level, bringing in as many passengers as possible via the airport platform, but divergent, at the micro level: AF wants some comfortable waiting space for their passengers, whereas AMC are building their growth on their retailing business and want to use the space for shopping areas.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the '90s both companies realised they were facing the same growing discontent from the neighbouring airport communities, that were suffering from the airport's negative environmental externalities (plane noises) but that received very little positive impact. Indeed, there was little access for the young unemployed population to the numerous jobs offered on the airport platform.

Set up in 1998 at the initiative of Air Fly, "Nestor", a non-profit grouping, aims at fostering the integration of local people who lack skills and so are at risk of not finding employment. It shares hiring opportunities with over a dozen member businesses and, in partnership with government agencies, runs a structure that combines training, on-the-job experience, and social worker support. Member businesses belong to the AF ecosystem as affiliated companies (Cater Company) or suppliers (such as AMC).

In 2010, some 285 young people attended training courses for airport jobs. In a period of 10 years, over 2,500 young people had received proper training and found a job within a company working on the airport platform. The key informants that we interviewed were all senior executives from AF (managers in charge of diversity issues), AMC (sustainability manager and purchasing managers), "Nestor" (deputy manager) and two small-sized company owners, working for both AF and AMC as their suppliers (equipment).

People were quite keen on discussing CSR issues and customer/supplier relationships, as long as we did not report verbatim and include names.

Interviews lasted between one hour and one hour 30 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed. We did a thematic analysis as recommended by Miles & Huberman (2003).

CASE STUDY DISCUSSION

Whereas a growing number of companies integrate social initiatives (Porter and Kramer, 2011, p. 5), most of those initiatives remained under the responsibility and management of one focal company. In our case study, the whole supply chain has "aggregated" to build a common initiative, "Nestor": they have moved from a vertical supply chain to a social community and this move can be explained by the Stakeholder Theory (see supra) as social interests link them together.

The asymmetry of power, which can be found in the "regular" business relationship between the two main actors (AF & AMC) versus their smaller suppliers or competitors (medium-sized airlines), no longer prevails here. As a signal that the asymmetry of power is not found in this common social initiative, AF, which is here the key customer, does not run the association: there is a strong involvement, but no "ownership".

The vocational training takes the upper hand over the vertical and horizontal business relationships. For instance, AF, which has not opened any position for the past few years, can still offer an internship to trainees that are bound to find a job with another airline. Companies share resources with a common social objective, regardless of their competitive position. If the economic competition has been left outside this social scheme, the trust and commitment which has been built in the business relationships around AF as key customer is the first layer which has enabled every actor to join and run the association.

We can relate AF behaviour to the "*resource-dependence platform"* described by Selsky and Parker (2011, p. 26), as all parties involved consider their *"collaborative engagements"* as a way, not of addressing their own individual needs but of solving their common problem, which is to provide jobs for the local community.

SOCIAL COMMUNITY: THE COMPANY SIZE DICHOTOMY

Still, the co-creation of social value through "Nestor", reveals a dichotomy between the two key actors (AF & AMC) and the other small or medium-sized actors.

For both AF and AMC, moving their relationship from the business to the social arena does not erase the spirit of confrontation, which is the landmark of their relationship. There even seems to be a struggle for a "spatial" and "cultural" leadership. Social initiatives are a way of spreading the corporate values throughout the airport ecosystem. Although AF and AMC unite social forces, they also take their own independent social initiatives as a soft struggle for some kind of "social leadership" over the airport territory.

This can be related to Moore (2006) explaining that "leaders" in business ecosystems "co - envision and co-manage the co-evolution among members: because of their adversarial business relationships, both companies cannot co-lead the social initiative built with "Nestor". AF, as the original founder keeps the leadership whereas the AMC commitment remains minimal and it does not stop them launching their own initiatives that sometimes compete with "Nestor".

At another level, the bonds of smaller-sized suppliers are re-enforced, within themselves or towards the two key actors - as working together on the social front helps them to solve operational issues in a more collaborative climate. "Nestor" becomes for them a "peaceful" place where they find the opportunity to better understand each other, outside an adversarial or competitive arena. Furthermore, whereas different functions in the business (sales people/ purchasers) and on the social front (HR managers) represent the major players (AF and AMC), bosses represent small and medium-sized companies in both instances, so that social initiatives and business are sort of mixed together. Social initiatives, such as "Nestor", create interpersonal bonds that help to improve daily coordination between companies and to better understand customer/supplier issues.

FROM SOCIAL COMMUNITY TO A "COOPETITIVE" ECOSYSTEM

As all involved companies belong to the air transport industry, they are anchored in the notion of "territory", represented by the airport infrastructures. For each actor, this territory is "theirs" and each actor struggles for power over the territory as some strong financial issues are at stake. We can relate this to the concept of "ecosystems" where the construct of "space" is key (see supra).

For AF and AMC there is a fight against each other's "hegemony", which is transferred from the business to the social arena. Behind the cooperative social initiatives, there are some shared interests, coming from the same environment, but there is also an intangible fight for each company culture to be spread out within the ecosystem. Both actors try to maintain a company spirit and give pride to their employees thanks to their social involvement, but they also try to extend that company spirit beyond the limit of their own company.

We can relate their behaviour to the ecosystem literature (Koenig, 2012) as they seem to be fighting to take the lead on the "community governance" so as to enforce their own values and culture to the community, and although there is no innovation at stake, we can see the "competitive" dimension of the relationship: building together a social community (cooperation) but struggling against each other to take the leadership of that community.

Hence, the joint CSR initiatives between AF and its major supplier (AMC) grounds them in a double "competitive" relationship: the first at the tangible level of their businesses, when they have to work together in a "traditional" customer-supplier relationship, while at the same time competing against each other for space occupation (retail versus lounge space), the second at the "intangible" level of leveraging their conjoint social initiatives to create social value whilst competing in spreading their own company values and culture.

Thus, concerning our research issues, several elements can be discussed.

The competitive aspect of the focal business customer-supplier relationship (between Air Fly and AMC which are competing for the same "space" resource at the airport) could have been perceived as a major hindrance for the development of joint CSR initiatives. But this is not the case: joint CSR practices are indeed developed, between the focal actors.

In our case study, we observe that joint CSR practices can develop between actors that have rather conflicting business relationships. Besides, both companies keep on manifesting a notable "competitive spirit" even in the arena of their joint CSR activities. Everything continues as if a "superior common project" (Koenig 2012), was able to align these "competing" actors. For the focal actors (AMC & AF), "Nestor" is not a real "pacified arena", yet as in a CSSP (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Selsky & Parker, 2011), there is a real collaboration to solve a problem, and then efficiency. Nevertheless, "Nestor" doesn't seem to bring a lot to the AMC/AF business relationship because the struggle for leadership over their common territory still prevails

The situation appears to be totally different when considering the situation of smaller suppliers. For them, the social arena created by "Nestor" really helps to develop the level of trust and operational fit between them and with AF and AMC, which, in this case, bears out the proposition that joint social initiatives may re-enforce the customer's ecosystem: "Nestor" offers small suppliers the opportunity to better understand their focal customer by meeting executives from other functions (mostly from the Human resources department) and getting a transversal and broader perception from their customer.

As within "Nestor", the small companies are generally represented by their owners and these small suppliers can improve their customer's relational mapping and leverage on their social initiatives to (slightly) offset the asymmetry of power (at least from an informational perspective): this may not help change the basis of business negotiations, but may increase the chances of winning business deals by helping to get a better understanding of the focal customers' issues and strategy as well as getting "upstream" information, such as new projects.

Then, the power balance between the actors involved may largely influence the mutual impact of "joint CSR practices" and "business relationships".

MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Though this research still has the status of work in progress, we think several managerial and theoretical implications may already have been underlined:

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

- First, whereas a growing number of companies integrate social initiatives (Porter and Kramer, 2011, p. 5), most of those initiatives remain under the responsibility and management of one focal company. In our case study, the whole supply chain has "aggregated" to build a common initiative: it has moved from a vertical supply chain into a social community. We think that the conceptualization of such "joint CSR practices" may contribute to the understanding of CSR initiatives in business-to-business contexts.
- Second, it clearly appears that CSR projects may prove, in certain cases, to be "arenas" as adversarial as "regular" businesses where the search for a "cultural" hegemony is just a substitute for the usual business competition... More than that, this "competition" doesn't seem to be an obstacle to the development of the CSR project.
- Third, the power balance between actors – in their regular business relationship - may be considered as influencing the "return impact" of joint CSR practices on the business relationship. Smaller actors that are involved in joint CSR practices may benefit from the "social" arena of the joint CSR practice to develop new kinds of bonds with other actors that can eventually create deeper business bonds.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

- On the one hand, small companies may find a way to slightly offset power asymmetry with their major customers by taking part in joint social initiatives: this may be a good way to better understand the needs, values and strategy of their customer. This may also open doors to executives at a high level of responsibility within the customer organisation (i.e. for the 10th anniversary of the creation of “Nestor”, a cocktail party was organised and the AF president himself came along to deliver a speech…).

- On the other hand, focal companies are not so keen to roll out joint social initiatives (apart from “Nestor”, AF and AMC roll out a lot more initiatives on their own) as supplier-customer relationships are now based on a lot of outsourcing, or contractual arrangements in which the focal customer wants to appropriate the biggest share of value: sharing social initiatives that could help suppliers to rebalance value sharing, is not high on their agenda…

Of course, our results are only based on one case study and this makes us very cautious in terms of their generalization, but it does provide us with insights on the business ecosystem management and the role that joint CSR initiatives may play in that ecosystem.

Further progress in our research will be organised under two main headings : first, the identification and analysis of new cases of joint CSR practices in other companies, and second, the confrontation of those situations with main concepts drawn from the works on ecosystems and cross-sector social partnerships.

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