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Galariniotou Maria, 1102100033
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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility is a current term that the last decade was a key driver to the corporations' actions. Gradually CSR has become part of a firm's strategy which is associated with obtaining competitive advantage and sustainable development. This study presents a review of how members of the Greek banking sector perceive CSR and in what extent is correlated with strategic implications. It is an effort to shed light to the key factors that drive the decision-making project as regard the adopted CSR practices.

With main driver the existing Literature Review and a qualitative research, it is present a case study of two Greek Banks. It is investigated which are the factors of the internal and external environment that corporations take into consideration when they adopt CSR practices.

Moreover it examines the way that the Banks handle the benefits obtaining from CSR actions and how they enhance these activities with investing in "Green solutions". This research tries to enrich the discussion on how CSR is related to Strategic Management and how corporations design and implement CSR strategy.

Key words: Corporate Social Responsibility, Strategy, Competitive Advantage, sustainability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a continuously evolving term that gains ground in the boundaries of the corporate world. A description of what CSR is perfectly mirrored in the definition provided by Carroll and Buchholtz in 2003, defined as the “economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time”.

CSR practices are becoming increasingly acknowledged by different stakeholders, since the former is believed to contribute to social welfare besides purely aiding a firm, to be economically viable. Beyond the fundamental objective of a firm which is the economic value creation in order to exist, CSR is a tool for each company that facilitates the fulfillment of its social and environmental commitments to its shareholders. This subject is extremely important as it is considered crucial to examine whether and to what extent CSR can serve as a strategic tool that aids firms to achieve competitive advantage and sustainable development.

Literature review in the specific subject, on how CSR can be connected to a company’s general strategic framework is scarce and vague especially with regard to the Greek context, with the exception of some work presented in Harvard Business Review (2006), and entitled “Redefining Corporate Social Responsibility” which is a trilogy of articles by Michael Porter, Mark Kramer and Simon Zadek. Due to this fact and the underlying gap in the literature review it was decided to elaborate the dissertation on this subject. Additionally, due to personal interest on studying this specific field of business activities and initiatives was an important motive to undertake the subject of CSR as a strategic tool. In our days, CSR is a field that recognizes important development and growth and it is thus important to shed light on this particular issue. Besides the economic crisis that we are currently going through, CSR practices seem to become more and more popular among companies. Because of this, it is crucial to examine the degree to which such practices are indeed adapted and implemented by firms, while revealing the underlying reasons of adopting such practices.

The purpose of the current project is at the first part to present some general ideas and views around the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility and how it is connected to important strategic dimensions of a company such as competitive advantage, added value and sustainable development. In the second part of this work, it is attempted to elaborate on opinions that already exist and present a case study of how CSR is applied strategically in the Greek banking sector.

According to a research conducted by Bert Scholtens in 2008, the banking sector presented significant improvement as regards the implementation of CSR programs from 2000 to 2005. Therefore it is essential to examine the banking sector and the CSR practices that are applied in the Greek context.

The methodology followed will be qualitative. The research done in order to fulfill this study includes both primary and secondary data. The primary data has been retrieved by structured questions-interviews that were executed at a three month period with employees that work at the CSR department at a sample of Greek banks. The secondary data were obtained by sources such as related studies and reports, internet sources, published material and information on the part of the organizations under examination, articles and books.

The data analysis retrieved by the structured questions-interviews, were compared to and combined with the information acquired by the secondary data in order to present if there is a connection between Corporate Social Responsibility and strategic dimensions of a bank. The interviews were addressed to some of the largest financial institutions in the Greek context: Piraeus Bank and Alpha Bank and were executed in a three month period directly to bank executives and representations of the CSR department of each bank.

Findings revealed that CSR constitutes a key and integrated part of the firms' strategies and in a general framework CSR practices are implemented towards the same direction and identical fields of activity.

At the theoretical level the research contributes to further informing and enhancement of the already existing related literature and knowledge with regard to CSR practices. To this end, this study reinforces previous related research such as the study of Bert Scholtens "Corporate Social Responsibility in the International Banking Industry" at the Journal of Business Ethics. The study also provides a comparative analysis between the banks that participated in the research and can give us a general overview on the manner that banks in the Greek context adopt, implement and make part of their strategy CSR practices. It will also provide us with a brief proof if at the end we will be in a position to say that banks in Greece handle CSR as a part of its overall strategy and in what way they succeed it.

At the managerial level, the current study offers a useful insight to managers as to implementation challenges and barriers they should consider so that the firm's expansion efforts could be successful to the limit of possible. This study can also prove to be an aid to the managers with regard to resource allocation decisions.

The limitations of the study are also presented and discussed, shedding light to potential future research directions.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theories and approaches that have been presented lately around the term of CSR have been controversial and vague, as the perspectives through which you can examine CSR are different and variable. The term of Corporate Social responsibility has been examined analytically the last two decades as businesses tend to adopt CSR and its practices in order to obtain benefits for themselves but also offer viable solution to pressing social issues. Because of this dual role that CSR can play for corporations, the findings from researches focused on CSR are plenty, complex and disputable.

The surveys that concentrate on how the banking sector's activities can be correlated to Corporate Social Responsibility are rare and started mainly in the 1990's.

According to the work presented by RARE on behalf of EU entitled: "CSR in the European Banking Sector: Evidence from a sector survey", CSR for banks was firstly correlated strictly with environmental and social activities as banks are considered to have an intermediary role to the economy of a country or a community as the European Union. CSR generally, is described to be a voluntary action, taken in order to offer important aid to emerging environmental and social problems.

The challenge for the corporations around the ongoing process of implementing CSR activities is how to satisfy the contemporary needs of the society and environment while preserving them so as to keep on being sustainable and viable for future generations.

How this can be succeeded in pragmatic conditions? How is the implementation of CSR practices affecting the overall strategic framework of the banks?

2.1 ORIGINS & EVOLUTION OF THE CSR CONCEPT

Corporate Social Responsibility and its implemented practices have been studied in such detail just recently; its origins can be traced a lot of decades ago. But as Archie B. Carroll refers to his paper “Corporate Social Responsibility Evolution of a Definitional Construct” (1999), the modern era for the term Social Corporate Responsibility begins in the 1950’s mainly in the United States at first. In this decade the term appears to be as Social Responsibility because “corporation” with the recent definition has not been adopted yet and “business” was used instead. This happens basically because the corporations were developed around its owner, so it was person-centralized. Carroll believes as Howard R. Bowen to be the “Father of Corporate Social Responsibility” as his publication in 1953 "Social Responsibilities of Businessmen" spotted the inauguration of the modern era of CSR. Bowen mainly discussed in his paper the responsibilities that businessmen have to the society they work in. He supports that through the decisions they make and the activities they undertake they can create shared value for the society and the community. He supports that citizens in the communities are affected from various dimensions from business activities. Bowen was the first to formulate a definition on the Social Responsibility that businessmen have. He says that: “It refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (1946, as cited in Bowen, 1953, p. 44). For the same decade there was not any further important literature with some exceptions like the book of Morrell Heald “The Social Responsibilities of Business: Company and Community, 1900-1960” (1970) that is clearly affected by the definition of Bowen.

During the 1960’s, the studies around the Social Responsibility increased significantly as consumerism has already become an international phenomenon and consumers raised their expectations to businesses so as to go a step forward than just manage their trading transactions. An important writer in this decade was Keith Davis who believes that Social Responsibility has to do with: “businessmen’s decisions and actions taken for reasons at least partially beyond the firm’s direct economic or technical interest” (Davis, 1960, p. 70). Davis believes that Social Responsibility is directly and equally connected to the social impact and power that businessmen can have over the members of a community.

The most interesting to this view is that Davis accepts that the relationship between Social Responsibility and social power is not one way-if you take up responsible actions for a community you increase your social power-but also, if you avoid your social responsibilities you can lose gradually your social power. In 1967 Davis, expanded his definition in CSR and wrote about the deeper meaning of it as:” The substance of social responsibility arises from concern for the ethical consequences of one’s acts as they might affect the interests of others” (Carroll, 1999, p.272). Finally, in this decade it was introduced new concepts around working environment, equal employment opportunities and healthy working environment.

According to Carroll’s survey, other important contributors to the formulation of the term Corporate Social responsibility was Joseph W. McGuire with his book “Business and Society”. In this work, McGuire stated that “The idea of social responsibilities supposes that the corporation has not only economic and legal obligations but also certain responsibilities to society which extend beyond these obligations” (p. 144).With the elaboration he made on the term he integrated the concepts of “Business Ethics” and “Corporate Citizenship”. He added the notion that businesses have further obligations than these that enforced by laws and personal economic benefit. He believed that corporations should deal with politics, education, and welfare of the community and satisfaction of employees. Additionally, when Davis revised his work on CSR in 1967 he added to his definition the term of ethics-obviously affected by McGuire- as social consequences by a businessman’s acts.

The 70’s was the era where new definitions of CSR were stated and the already existing expanded. In this decade the first attempt that was made to analyze, explain and even criticize the definitions of CSR was introduced by Harold Johnson with his book “Business in Contemporary Society: Framework and Issues” (1971). He described the field of action for social Responsibility as: conventional Wisdom” and defined it as: ““A socially responsible firm is one whose managerial staff balances a multiplicity of interests. Instead of striving only for larger profits for its stockholders, a responsible enterprise also takes into account employees, suppliers, dealers, local communities, and the nation” (p. 50). He elaborate on the term by describing the different categories of actions that business can focus.

During this decade Johnson included in his views CSR as a tool for long term profit maximization, utility maximization by enterprise and importance hierarchy of business targets that depends in a set of factors like past experience and performance.

An important progress was noted also in 1971 when the Committee for Economic Development (CED), published “Social Responsibilities for Business Corporations”. What is noticeable in this work is that recognized the social needs as the primary focal area for businesses. In this way a lot of writers tried to widen the “Corporate Social Responsibility horizons” at this time by presenting further details around CSR concept. Steiner I his book “Business and Society” (1971) introduced models that could determine the social responsibility of a business and the conditions where it could be applied. Furthermore in 1975 it was firstly introduced the term of Corporate Social Performance and its linkage with CSR by S. Prakash Sethi and later bi Carroll in 1977. Generally the 1970’s was the era where all the corporation obligations (legal & economical) were integrated with social and voluntary activities that enhance corporate performance in the long run.

In the 1980’s CSR research paid attention to the peripheral concepts around Corporate Social Responsibility like public policy, corporate social responsiveness, corporate social performance, business ethics and stakeholder theory. Thomas Jones was a new entrant at the discussion that started around CSR and published a criticism to CSR and present arguments “for and against” it. Jones moreover was the one who described CSR activities and practices as a “process” and not as a result of general business activities. He believed that if CSR is integrated as a process in a business can have as an outcome the “social behavior”. (Carroll, 1999).

In 1983 Carroll expanded more his definition about CSR and recognized four constitutional axes for CSR: economic, legal ethical and philanthropic (or voluntary).

Drucker, who had already presented some views for CSR (1954), presented a very interesting perspective for it. Drucker considered profitability and responsibility “as compatible notions” (Carroll, 1999). He supported that the social problems that corporations are called to solve, should be faced (by corporations) as opportunities for profit, business benefit, human competence and wealth. Another important study in this decade was written by Aupperle, Carroll, and Hatfield (1985). This study focused in the four components referred above and tried to connect in a more empirical way Social Responsibility with business performance. They elaborated on these components and made a separation: the economic side was the “concern for economic performance” and legal, ethical and philanthropic as the “concern for society”.

During the 1990's, the situation continued in the same way, but researchers elaborating on the terms immediately related terms as happened in the 80's. The most significant fact of this decade was the revisited publication of Corporate Social Performance (CSP) model by Donna J. Wood in 1991. She took the basic knowledge by Carroll's three basic axes of his CSP model: principles, processes & policies and the four integrated components of CSR.

Finally, Carroll carried out a survey in order to find out which were the most important factors that should be further researched according to the opinion of 50 academic leaders in management field.

As we can conclude, Corporate Social Responsibility is a term that have been researched and defined by multiples and varied points of view and through these decades we can notice the highest degree of published books and articles about it.

2.2 CSR COMPONENTS

According to Carroll (1983), "*corporate social responsibility involves the conduct of a business so that it is economically profitable, law abiding, ethical and socially supportive. To be socially responsible then means that profitability and obedience to the law are foremost conditions when discussing the firm's ethics and the extent to which it supports the society, in which it exists with contributions of money, time and talent*" (p.608). This definition includes the four components represent the kind of responsibilities that a corporation should take into account.

These are:

- Economic responsibilities,
- Legal responsibilities,
- Ethical responsibilities,
- Philanthropic responsibilities

Carroll's categorization of CSR components is the one who has been noted in the literature and durable during the years. This happened because this model is simple and has been revised by Carroll himself, plenty of times, have been supported by scholars and educators and finally it brings the economic dimension in the forefront that serves the needs of business people.

It was in 1991 when Carroll introduced his model on a pyramid. (See exhibit 1). He presented it in this way because he believed that all the four components should be taken seriously into consideration by managers but in those years (1985-1990), the ethical and philanthropic dimensions have gained ground. These four components are of equal important and should be treated by mangers as a set of dimensions and not individually. A deeper view around CSR components is presented below:

Economic Responsibilities

Since a business unit was created for the first time the motive and in the same time the objective was the maximization of profits. These profits were generated by the commercial activities of the corporation with its customers. The commercial activities include the selling and buying of goods and services by customers so as they can satisfy their needs.

So this means that first of all, businesses want to be profitable in order to continue to operate efficiently. Moreover corporations try to have consistent profits and do not be unstable as regard their profits. In addition, consistent and efficient profits crate a reassurance to your stakeholders as they are directly connected to the company's financial performance. Finally, the efficient financial operation of a corporation can make it distinguish among its competitors and gain an important competitive advantage in the long run.

Legal Responsibilities

Corporations-by definition-are legal entities with target the profit maximization. These two are the responsibilities that a corporation should consider in order to operate, otherwise they cannot survive. So undertaking legal responsibilities means to obey to the principles, regulations and rules that are established by lawmakers and they are set by boards of government in a local, state or federal level. So the operation of a company should abide the legal framework that is enforced in each place they may are established.

Compliance with the law for a corporation means that their missions is clearly stated and not overlooks the regulation and respects the local communities. In this way it is ensured that the company follows the codified regulations. It is important for a corporation to provide customers with goods that follow the standards that are implied by legal regulations. Last but not least, a responsible corporation should put an effort on being perceived to the public as a corporate citizen that is law-abiding.

Ethical Responsibilities

Beyond the consideration of these “obligatory” responsibilities that integrates fairness and justice ethical responsibilities refer to the rules that are implied or restricted by the local communities that are not codified by law. (Carroll, 1991). The third level of the pyramid is ethical responsibilities stem by the expectations, values and moral philosophy at a group of people. This means that all the immediately connected entities to a corporation demand from it to cater the emerging needs of a community. These entities can be employees, customers, suppliers and residents of the community where the company is established who want to be treated with fairness and respect. The compliance with societal norms, ethical rules and moral rights create a healthy environment for a corporation to operate and establishes an honest relationship with stakeholders. In order to succeed in this field a corporation should not undermine the ethical responsibilities and treat them equally with the economic and legal responsibilities. The public image of the businesses are seen as moral and ethical as it goes a step forward and these always have positive impact on the perception of the customers, employees and generally the stakeholders of the company.

Philanthropic Responsibilities

The philanthropic responsibility can be characterized by a definite voluntarism as it includes all the activities and practices that a company performs so as to be considered as a responsible corporate citizen and as an active member of the community its operates. With these actions a company encourages the social welfare and goodwill of local communities (Carroll, 1991). The difference between ethical and philanthropic responsibilities is that the latter, if it is not adopted the corporation should not be perceived as unethical or immoral. The members of a community raise expectations to corporations so as to improve the conditions in which the company operates and so are able to offer back to the corporation. The fields in which philanthropic action focus is education and arts.

The corporation offer on their willing money, facilities and utility materials that can enhance the standards of living in the community. Charities are practices that include the voluntary participation of a company's employees and disposition of their free time in building trustworthy and respectful relationships with the local communities. The philanthropic responsibilities are on the top level of the pyramid as it is highly desired by all the involved parties and improves the life quality.

2.3 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY DIMENSIONS

CSR is a field of action in a corporation where there is high degree of interaction between the internal and external dimension. When we refer to the internal dimension of a CSR policy, we mean the "corporation itself" and with the term external dimension we refer to the external environment of the corporation "the surroundings and local communities" (T. Metaxas, M. Tsavdaridou, "Corporate Social Responsibility in Europe: Denmark, Hungary, Greece, March 2010). The internal environment of a corporation is consisted by its employees and shareholders who are the immediately concerned entities. On the other hand the external environment of a corporation is these people who are affected by a company's activities in an indirect way like creditors, suppliers, customers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and local communities in the area where the corporation is located.

Metaxas and Tsavdaridou in their study about Corporate Social Responsibility in Europe (included Greece) mentioned some basic sectors both in the internal and external environment of a corporation that a manager should take into consideration so as to apply CSR practices in an effective way. These factors are developed below:

For the internal environment:

- **Human Resources:** A corporation in order to be able to succeed its objectives should have the appropriate and skilled personnel. But in order to hire and retain these experienced employees a business has to offer equal job opportunities, constant training, good working conditions, respect and justice. If these practices are followed, corporations will contribute in the long run to the reduction of unemployment and fight social inclusion.

- **Health and Safety:** This issue is described in a different part of the study and not in the Human Resources section because it is considered to be on of the top importance level to integrate CSR in a corporation. The “health and safety” refers not only to the employees but also to the provided product or service. Labeling, certification and standards are the proof of a corporation’s quality both in the procedures and products. In this way, customers, employees and other interested parties can be reassured about the provided services. (T. Metaxas, Tsavdaridou M., 2010). These certifications improve a company’s reputation and create added value.
- **Environmental concerns:** These concerns are originated to the endeavor of corporations to operate in an efficient and appropriate way without wasting or destroying the natural resources. These activities include pollution control, carbon dioxide emissions, global warming and flora/fauna in imminent danger of extinction. With green management and environmental responsibilities companies are in a position to promote long-term sustainability. In order to be implemented appropriately, these policies should be an integrated part of a company’s overall strategy and the participation of all the corporate members is essential.
- **Adaption to change:** Last but not least, being able to change and maneuver to the general unstable conditions of our days is a qualification. With this feature, corporations can handle pressuring problems either internal to the company (with employees) or external (with the society). This can be succeeded with the cooperation of employees and mangers, continuous learning, up-to-date equipment and open dialogue.

For the external environment:

- **Communication with Local Communities:** The adopted CSR policies that a business adopts are intimately correlated with the local communities. The benefits are plenty for both sides; the operations of a corporation in an area can offer job opportunities, donations, contribution to charities and creation of significant infrastructure. On the other hand, offer clients, skilled workforce and generally components that enhance a company’s competitiveness. In order to be an effort like this successful, the degree of involvement of the company should be high and should cooperate with the local organizations with harmony. The interrelation should be boosted from both side and this would create a stable environment of coexistence.

- Respect of Human Rights: The respect of international guidelines by companies exists because corporations are a part of a wider global supply chain. Compliance with governmental rules includes action against child labor or force labor. (T. Metaxas, Tsavdaridou M., 2010).
- However there are obstacles that should be overcome such as lack of clarity in legislation or lack of controlling mechanisms. With these actions the image and reputation can accordingly be improved. Besides all these facts, in developing countries these policies are very difficult to be applied.
- Participation in Global environment protection activities: Corporations have significant impact to the environment with their activities. Usually some companies participate voluntarily to organizations that take action for the protection of the global environmental and social initiatives. By adopting such practices companies contract to the promotion of global sustainability and development.

2.4 BENEFITS OF CSR

Corporate Social Responsibility and its applied practices can generate significant benefits for a firm. First of all a responsible company creates an improved reputation and stand to the customers. In addition the positive image of a corporation can retain the already existing customers and acquire new. These practices additionally increases brand recognition and loyalty. This means that the financial situation of the company are improved so the operating cost is reduced and the profit are increased. Moreover in the long term horizon CSR practices can be a tool for gaining differentiation, competitiveness and innovation. (T. Metaxas, Tsavdaridou M., 2010). From all these the corporations create improved relationships with the investment community and easier access to capital funds.

Employees also enjoy benefits from the implementation of CSR practices.

They work on a healthy and clean environment, they have flexible schedule, and they can attend training sessions for continuous enhancement of their job capabilities and plenty of others. This has as a result the dedication and commitment of employees to their job and the increase of their productivity.

In general terms, CSR can be a useful mean to improve a company's strategic position in the competitive field, offer an important competitive advantage and differentiation. With CSR implementation it is created shared value for the internal and external "members" and better capacity on managing risks. Stronger relationships with local communities are created through stakeholders' engagement and the corporation is aided in order to develop new products and services. Finally corporations, with these activities accept reduced regulatory oversight (T. Metaxas, Tsavdaridou M., 2010). They are subject to fewer controls and inspections as they considered being ethical and moral.

2.5 EXISTING CRITICISM AGAINST CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

CSR is a concept with a lot of aspects to examine and implement and also, it is a relatively new practice, so it is reasonable to have some opposite opinions to this. The main point of disagreement has to do with the possible disorientation of the corporation by its initial target which is profit maximization. The "judgers" of CSR believe that dealing with social and moral issues are not a problem that companies have to solve and moreover that companies do not have the financial power to support this kind of activities. These actions are believed to undermine the concern about stakeholders' and their benefit. Another point of criticism about CSR relies on the belief that by implementing such practices, big companies create for the less powerful companies a competitive disadvantage as they might not be in a position to follow similar practices. The truth is that CSR is policy adopted by companies on a voluntary basis and in the long run offers to the corporations plenty of advantages as analyzed above. Finally, there is a view that suggests to the managers to let the experts (sociologists, psychologists) to handle societal problems. They believe that although the fact that they have skills for being excellent managers, they do not have the required knowledge to resolve ethical or social problems.

Beyond the fact that these opinions exist, they are very rare and it can not be an obstacle to corporations that are willing to support society, special social groups of people and generally people and communities that are in a difficult position.

2. CSR AS A STRATEGIC TOOL

Strategy is the mean by which long term objective will be achieved (Fred David, Strategic Management, 2011). In business, strategy can make a corporation unique among the competitors. In our days, CSR has become an emergency as governments, activist organizations and media overwhelm on pressuring societal issues that should definitely have to be part of corporations' concerns. So business leaders try to make CSR policies part of their operational activities and later, integrated part of business culture. CSR strategy refers to the tactic that should be followed by a corporation in order to handle societal problems in the most effective way when in the same time would offer the business a competitive advantage (Al. D'Amato, S. Henderson ,S. Florence, Corporate social responsibility and sustainable business, 2006). It includes both internal and external dimensions that work together and interact.

According to Husted and Allen (2001) the factors that should be taken into consideration in order to formulate a successful CSR strategy are:

- Structure of industry (Porter, 1986)
- Internal resources of the firm (Barney, 1991)
- Corporation ideologies and values
- Relationships with stakeholders

All these dimensions should be treated by managers as a common integrated framework in order to maximize both financial and social effectiveness.

Porter and Kramer in their article entitled: "Strategy & Society: The Link between Competitive advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility" published in Harvard Business Review in 2006, support that a CSR strategy can be practiced by "pioneering innovations" in the operating procedures and create shared value both for the company and the society. The "pioneering innovations" are related to the products or services of a company and in the value chain. It means that a corporation can act socially responsible by incorporating such policies in its production (product or services). The progress and the success of society and a business are connected closely to each other. So when the resources and the knowledge for CSR actions are available both sides enjoy the benefits.

From the formulation of social corporate strategy the organization can obtain competitive advantage. Sources of competitive advantage for a firm can be its reputation, economic/environmental/ social performance, added value and image. If one or a combination of these components is rare valuable and difficult to be imitated it can constitute a unique competitive advantage for the company.

A mistake that an extensive part of companies do as regards their CSR responsibilities is that they handle it in a generic way, since other companies do and face CSR as a common trend. Instead, in order to have results that would be beneficial both for the corporation and the society, they should try to “personalize” the CSR practices to the capabilities of each company individually. In this way each company can decide in its own terms the money they are going to give for CSR, the resources that they are going to use and the kind of factors that have to do with the internal operations of a corporation. As a result, the implementation of CSR practices in an effective way can prove to be a source of opportunity, innovation and competitive advantage. (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Moreover, when the business reaches up to point and has made CSR practices an integrated part of its business strategy social progress is succeeded through the disposal of useful human and material resources, expertise and technology by the corporation.

The company should make some modifications, reconstruct relationships and motives. The key that leads to success on the implementation of CSR practices is to integrate the recognition and hierarchy of social needs and how all these can become a part of its operation management. Corporate Social Responsibility should not be handled just as a common trend; it should become an incorporated part of the unique value proposition of the company’s strategy. Only in this way the CSR policies would be beneficial for a corporation and strengthen its market position. The social problems that companies are called to resolve, are thousands, the best practice for every company is to make a choice and focus on specific problems that could leverage the provided resources and fund that it can dispose and in the same time gain the “greatest competitive benefit” (Porter & Kramer,2006). According to Porter and Kramer, CSR is a “selective procedure”, that should be part of the Research & Development Department of a corporation. It is an investment that will enhance the long term competitiveness and competitive advantage.

When corporations undertake CSR actions, the main contribution to the social welfare of a community is the creation of a thriving economy. Beyond this long term effect, companies in the framework of CSR offer to a community extensive job opportunities, goods and services, important and infrastructure and capital investments that improve the local conditions. In a sense corporations have as an objective to achieve sustainability both for the company and the community. (D. Petkoski & Nigel Twose Public Policy for Corporate Social Responsibility, 2003)

A CSR strategy in order to be effective should take into account the culture and the values of each corporation and definitely the regulations, the needs and the peculiarities of each community independently. Strategy is the path that should be followed in order to connect the interrelated social objectives and profitability.

3. THE GREEK BANKING SECTOR

Banks are financial intermediaries that finance economic activities of legal entities. Beyond this kind of activities, banks, the last years have integrated a more social character to its products and procedures.

The last two years, Greece is going through a financial crisis due to budget deficits and extraordinary high public debt. This situation has affected importantly the Greek banking system. Besides this fact, the Greek banks succeeded to overcome this crisis with the support of the European Central Bank. The Greek banks have strong capital background and additionally have not been exposed to risks that caused the international financial crisis. Moreover for the problems and the risks they have to face, they followed a prudent management policy.

According to a recently published study of the Hellenic Bank Association in June 2010, the number of the financial institutions in Greece between the years 2003-2010 noticed an increase of 10%, from 59 banks in 2009 to 65 in April 2010. Accordingly, the branches of banks in Greece (without the branches of Bank of Greece) were calculated at 4,264. This number is more than double respectively to the number of branches to the euro zone. This happens because there is a tendency in Greece by the customers of banks to be served by the branch and not by other ways (e.g. electronic banking, phone banking). In addition the Greek banks in order to expand its network created branches even in areas with low degree of urbanization (islands, highlands).

According to Bert Scholtens in his study *Corporate Social Responsibility in the International Banking Sector* (2008), “The banking system appears to play an important role in the economic development”. In this way, banks, affect sustainable development too. Lars Silver and Bjorn Berggren at their article “The close Relationship Strategy-Corporate Brand Development in Banking” (2009), corporate social responsibility practices applied in the banking sector has been affected in an extensive degree by technology and functionality. But these two factors can not work individually. In the banking sector the financial products are identical, so they have to be correlated with other characteristics in order to differentiate. These factors are corporate credibility and sustainability. Corporate credibility is a key success factor in the banking industry as trust from employees is the most significant to its relation with the bank.

On the other hand, sustainability is a characteristic of financial products as “an established corporate brand can survive several life cycles” (Silver and Berggren). CSR is a complex practice, taken voluntarily and goes a step forward from corporations’ business strategy which is the economic benefit.

Turning now to the competition in the Greek Banking sector, since 2001, the conditions have been extremely pressuring. The objective of these activities is to sustain the existing customers and of course obtain new. Banks try to achieve differentiation trough the pricing of their financial services. As a result, at the recent years, the banking sector to in Greece proved to be the most competitive among them, corporations.

The relationship between the banking sector and Corporate Social Responsibility is a subject with little literature background as these practices are implemented basically the last decade (by banks) especially in Greece. Especially in the field of the strategy followed by the banks and if the CSR practices are an integrated part of it the findings are very scarce. With my research I aim to demonstrate how CSR constitutes an important field of activities and should be a part of corporate strategy and can be a strategic tool for competitive advantage and long term sustainability.

4. METHODOLOGY

Research Background

This research regards an investigation of how Corporate Social Responsibility and its applied practices can serve as a strategic tool for increasing a company's competitiveness and create an important competitive advantage. What is examined in this study is whether Greek banks consider CSR as a part of its overall strategy and can improve its differentiation competitive characteristics. The research was carried out during a three-month period. The most appropriate research method in order to present an in-depth examination, qualitative research was more feasible and appropriate. Qualitative method can be a very useful tool when it is desired to examine deeply a subject and present a spherical overview. In order to design the structure of the case study it was used as a key driver the Case study methodology of Yin which was presented in 2002, in his book: "Case Study Research, Design and Methods".

Survey instrument

The kind of research that was conducted in order to collect the primary data was a structured questionnaire that was addressed to personnel that has duties related to Corporate Social Responsibility. The questions were open-ended in order to collect data on how a sample of Greek banks use implement CSR practices as a strategic tool and which are their long-term objectives.

The interview was prepared and adjusted, based on the relative study of Duygu Turker entitled: "Measuring Corporate Social Responsibility: A scale development Study" (2008).

The aim was to collect the primary data from middle-level managers who play a key role in the whole procedure from designing to implementing CSR practices.

The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions about general CSR actions and some more specific information about how CSR is associated with strategy.

The first part of the interview has as a goal to retrieve information regarding a more general framework around the implemented CSR actions of the bank and the personal opinion of the managers around business sustainability and continuous development. The second part of the questionnaire consists of questions in order to reveal whether and in which way the bank

introduces the CSR practices and how it is integrated in the general corporate strategy of the company.

In the final part of the structured questions the implementation stage of the CSR policies is examined and some more detailed information such as the budget disposed for CSR and how it is communicated to the internal and external environment of the company. Furthermore, it was asked to the respondents to make any further comments that they considered important from their personal point of view.

Before the distribution of the questionnaires to the bank executives, the former were pilot tested with both academics and practitioners that are CSR experts or are experienced in topics and activities dealing with CSR practices. From this test some improvements were made in order to make the interview more comprehensible by the respondents and so that useful information would be retrieved. Not any serious problems arose with regard to the questionnaire's content and comprehensiveness, while the pilot-tested questionnaires were excluded from the research results.

The respondents of the questionnaires in both banks were executives that were responsible for the CSR department of each bank. The questionnaire was answered in both cases by electronic post immediately after their initial contact. The completed questionnaire was returned directly via electronic mail. As regards the anonymity and the confidentiality of the respondents it was stated clearly in the electronic message that they are guaranteed.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

In the research conducted, two types of data were used: primary and secondary. The former refers to the data collected by the questionnaires that were given to the banks' CSR executives. After the questionnaires were answered and collected, the respondents' answers were closely considered and analyzed. The secondary data were collected by a combination of sources: journals, articles and related studies that were found in the databases provided by the International Hellenic University Library, books and official websites of the banks. These data were grouped and filtered to focus on aspects dealing with CSR and especially the presented components of implemented strategies.

For the purposes of this research it is presented firstly an in-depth analysis firstly of Piraeus bank as regards its profile and framework of CSR actions and respectively it is made an identical presentation for Alpha Bank. After this, in order to have an overall perspective a comparative analysis is presented.

In the following, the profile and case of the banks under examination is first presented, since this will shed light as to the incorporation and implementation of CSR within each bank's context.

6.1 PIRAEUS BANK

6.1.1 Piraeus Bank Profile

Piraeus bank was founded in 1916 and operated as a private bank until 1975. From this year until 1991 turned its operations publicly. Since 1991 it operates until today as a private and universal bank. It is one of the biggest groups of companies that cover all the activities of the financial sector in Greece. The number of branches in the Piraeus Bank network for the first semester of 2011 was 866 (355 in Greece and 511 abroad) and the number of employees 13,135 people.

During the years 1998-2002 the group put efforts to establish its position in ne of the top banks in the Greek context through mergers and acquisitions mainly. From 2005 to 2007 Piraeus Bank expanded its activities to Balkan countries, Ukraine and Cyprus following the same strategy.

Since its foundation, Piraeus Bank acquired a specialization in issues of consumer and housing credit and other private issues, like small and medium sizes enterprises funding, investment banking and leasing. All these activities are provided to each customer through its well-established network of branches. In the same time, since 2000, Piraeus bank created the first, integrated system of electronic banking, "winbank".

Piraeus Group tries to come through a successful cooperation of corporate development and social responsibility. It promotes these actions through systemic relationships with "social

partners” –as they are characterized by the bank- by adopting social practices basically to environmental issues.

These environmental programs have as a target to serve both internal needs that manage the environmental impact of the bank’s operations and in the same time the external needs through environmental-friendly financial products and moreover increasing the knowledge of its customers around environmental issues. On this basis, Piraeus Bank has introduced the “Greek Banking” initiative that regards the construction of bank’s branches with conditions that are ecological and don not harm the environment and the development of “green” products. These products support the financing of ecological cultures, exploitation of alternative sources of energy, waste disposal, eco-tourism and agro-tourism.

The basic objectives of Piraeus Bank are the sustainable development of the society and a robust & healthy economy. As regards the provided products and services that the bank develops they have as an objective the balanced growth and effectiveness.

6.1.2 GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF CSR IN PIRAEUS BANK

According to Piraeus Bank, the international financial crisis and the globalization are the most important factors that had caused radical changes to the social conditions around the world. The bank has taken the responsibility to take action so as to support the coherence and development of the society. These actions go a step forward than these that are enforced by the legislation and have a voluntary character that promotes the “social peace and growth”. Piraeus bank engages in these activities its employees, suppliers, partners, shareholders, customers, the society and the local communities in order to succeed the social balance and tranquility.

The bank targets, with its CSR initiatives to develop the conditions of social growth, to protect the environment of the local communities where it operates, to promote the Greek culture and protect our cultural treasures. All these can be succeeded according to the corporation if the internal entities (meaning the employees) of the company firstly understand and adopt the philosophy of sustainability and quality of life that the bank supports. This will be effective if it is combined with harmony, with efficient corporate governance.

The benefits that can be retrieved by the implementation of CSR practices, according to the bank’s opinion are multiple. First of all the implementation begins from the internal

environment of the corporation, so better working conditions, commitment of increasing productivity, respect of employees rights.

If all these are achieved, according to the bank's statement, they can obtain "Commercial advantage against competitors". This notion agrees absolutely with what has been referred above that the implementation of CSR policies is a tool to achieve competitive advantage.

The respondent of the questionnaire presented the main dimensions of their CSR activities are the environment, the society and culture. All the activities that are related to CSR are designed as a part of the bank's overall strategy as it promotes the sustainable growth both for the corporation and the society.

Piraeus bank according to the theoretical findings prioritizes in CSR components the effective Corporate Governance. The organizational structure of the corporation is organized in such a way that it can serve efficiently the needs of Corporate Social Programs. Corporate Governance is serving the internal dimension that should take into consideration according to the literature review, when CSR practices are adopted. The structure of the different departments allows each and every member of the corporation to communicate with each other on different levels, while at the same time the distinctive responsibilities are preserved.

The other component of the internal environment is the communication and education of employees about the continuously evolving CSR issues. The bank in order to make corporation's operations environmental friendly, tries to raise employees' awareness and sensitivity.

It supports energetically the voluntary participation of the personnel to CSR activities but also targets to make CSR an integrated part of its employee's culture and personal values.

Environmental Contribution

In 2008 Piraeus bank established its first Green Banking branch in Athens. It is the first Green Branch not only in Greece but also in Balkans. This action is an innovation in our days in the sector of Green entrepreneurship. The purpose of this branch is to inform its customers form investments in state-of-the-art technology and environmental friendly products and services. In this branch, customers can be fully informed about the environmental policy that Piraeus Bank

follows the implications of the bank's operations that protect the environment, alternative sources of energy and environmental legislation of the European Union.

Piraeus bank is the first bank in Greece that introduced a full program for electronic banking, named "Winbank". With the convenient way of bank transactions huge quantities of paper are wasted and a lot of natural resources like forest trees and water are harmed irreversibly. As a result, the use of alternative channels of distribution the effects to the environment are reduced significantly. Other alternative transaction solutions are Automated Teller Machine (ATM), "easypay" machines and phone banking.

According to the bank representative, Piraeus bank has a specific strategy in order to implement its environmental policy. It includes specified investments on: energy saving, improvement of energy efficiency of its buildings, decrease of professional and training transportations and supply with energy saving equipment. It is believed that these investments will reduce the negative implications to the environment by the bank's operations and create sustainable solutions and decent standards of living for next generations.

Additionally, Piraeus Bank, have created special products and services for its customers with better terms and conditions that have to do with environmental friendly investments like energy saving, green transportation and waste disposal.

Cultural Contribution

Piraeus Bank with purpose to reserve and promote the cultural identity of Greece has created the "Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation" that is a non-profit organization and deals with museums, publications and research. The foundation has established a number of thematic museums in cooperation with local communities publish works around history, archeology and technology and funds research programs that study the Greek cultural heritage. All the operations of the Foundation are funded entirely by Piraeus Bank.

Social Contribution

The focus in this section is given mainly to socially sensitive groups of people. Piraeus Bank cooperates with NGO's that support the basic social principles of the bank which are: Family,

Health, and Child”. It supports families with a lot of children in Thrace, funds rehabilitation communities, and helps organizations that support old people.

6.2 ALPHA BANK

6.2.1 Alpha Bank Profile

Alpha Bank is one of the banks with the longest history in the Greek context. It was founded in 1879 as a commercial corporation that later focused on banking activities mainly in the exchange market. In 1924 its headquarters are transferred to Athens (from Peloponnesus). In 1947 the bank changes its name to “Commercial Credit Bank” and in 1994 takes its takes the name “Alpha Credit Bank”. In 1991, Alpha Credit Bank acquires 51% of Ionian Bank shares and in 2000 Ionian Bank is fully acquired by the renamed “Alpha Bank”.

While this study was elaborated, in the 20th of September Eurobank announced the merger with Alpha Bank that will create a bank that will be in the 23rd position in the euro zone ranking of banks.

Alpha Bank is a Group of corporations that include insurance, leasing, real estate and investment companies. It serves 4,000,000 customers in Greece and abroad. It lays its operations to Balkan countries like Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, FYROM, Albania, to Cyprus, Ukraine and United Kingdom.

Alpha bank, although the unfavorable conditions that exist in the Greek economy, succeeded this year to achieve its goals which include: efficient liquidity, effective risk management, stable capital base and decrease of operational costs. Alpha bank supports the efforts of the Greek government t survive from the financial crisis and has developed extensive cooperation with the European Central Bank.

Alpha Bank occupies 7,662 in Greece and abroad and has a distribution channel that counts 900 branches (400 in Greece). Moreover it has developed alternative channels of distribution such as Alpha web Banking, Alpha mobile Banking, Alpha Line &Alpha phone banking.

Alpha Bank is one of the banks in the Greek context that have developed an extensive network of activities around Corporate Social Responsibility. A system of values, targets and actions is the driver that enforces the adoption and implementation of CSR practices. The CSR activities of the Bank focus particularly on the human aspect. It designs all of its social activities with people playing the key role.

It takes into consideration people that connect with the bank both in the internal and the external environment of the bank. At first it is reassured that the bank's employees are satisfied and work in healthy and stable conditions with respect to their rights.

Then, the external activities are organized that handle pressuring societal issues, protection of the environment and preservation of cultural heritage.

Their initial objective of operation is to provide to its customers credibility and continuous improvement to the management of their needs in a fast and consistent way. With these actions, Alpha bank contributes to the enhancement of the Greek banking system efficiency and creation of development opportunities.

6.2.2 GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF CSR IN ALPHA BANK

Alpha bank began CSR activities the last 11 years as it started to include in its annual reports social and environmental indexes that show the implications of its operations beyond the financial results. The primary issues that the bank managed were its human resources and cultural actions. After this, gradually it adopted policies for the environment protection. According to the bank representative, during the Olympic Games of Athens in 2004, Alpha Bank participated energetically with sponsorships and important support to special events.

The corporate Governance of the Bank is a key point for Alpha bank, as it defines the commitments and practices of the bank to its customers primarily and then to local communities and society. The bank has established also special controlling committees which operate within the bank's framework that approve if everything agrees with what have been stated and agreed. Issues of environment and society are decided by the Governing Board of the bank that reassures the sustainable development of the corporation in a balanced environment. Alpha Bank is characterized by ethicality which is spread among all the hierarchical levels of the corporation as it was underlined by the respondent.

Alpha Bank in order to incorporate CSR in its strategic & operational framework has developed four basic commitments that define the content of its CSR activities.

These commitments are:

- Increased benefits from the provided financial and credit services in order to enhance social robust.
- Continuous support and care for the bank's personnel.
- Products and services of high quality & credibility to its customers that support continuous development and sustainability.
- Design & implementation of sustainable solutions for environmental problems.

Alpha Bank creates special investment products and services that promote sustainable development named "Alpha Green Solutions". These products support funds for ecological constructions and transportation that enhance ecological conscience.

Additionally it has developed a special portfolio with Exchange trade Funds that invest in corporations that deal with alternative sources of energy, management of water resources and waste disposal.

For all these actions, Alpha Bank has been honored with a lot of Awards for all its CSR actions from different organizations.

For all the reasons referred above, Alpha Bank has created a network with the parties which are connected with the Bank and supports its activities. These are its employees, suppliers, customers, shareholders, NGOs, the business community, state & government and local communities. The dialogue with these parties is cultivated, as they can be the base for the development for CSR activities. In this way, the opportunities that arise are managed efficiently and the risk is handled appropriately. The mutual respect has as a result innovative solutions that promote economic growth and sustainability.

As the bank representative stated, the appropriate implementation of CSR practices begin from the internal environment of the corporation. The driving force is its employees that are

encouraged to participate in voluntary basis to actions that support social consistency and prosperity.

In this framework it has determined a special day called “Voluntarism day of Alpha Bank’s employees” where all the employees of the bank are motivated to participate to activities that has to do with environmental issues (reforestation, cleaning of beaches), or social issues (visits to foundations that support sensitive groups of people or schools at the local communities). Alpha Bank believes its personnel to be the most valuable asset of the corporation. For this reason, Alpha Bank offers equal job & development opportunities free of stereotypes of gender, ethnicity and religious beliefs. Furthermore, it takes action to improve their skills and qualifications, like educational seminars, corporate postgraduate degrees and training weeks. In this way, it enforces the creation of a balanced professional and personal life that contributes not only to the achievement of corporate objectives but also to the creation of a merit society.

As regards the financial resources that the Bank disposes for the CSR actions, due to difficult economic conditions in our days, Alpha focuses mostly in emerging social areas. For instance in 2007 it provided to fire victims an important amount of money.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1 Comparative Analysis

A key finding, as the analysis of the research revealed, is that both banks recognize and take seriously into consideration their role as integrated parts of the society. This leads them to perceive CSR and treat its practices as an integral part of their strategy. In order to achieve in doing so, they try to create a stable environment taking into account first of all CSR’s internal dimension. This means that they invest in the development of the internal environment of the bank, primarily referring to the development of their employees. Both banks invest in educational and training programs that enhance the personnel’s skills and qualifications. Moreover, they pay particular attention to aiding their employees to participate in CSR activities and adopt the values, principles and culture that the corporation follows in order to

perform CSR activities and get the desired results. This focus on the specific issue has been widely supported in the study of Metaxas & Tsavdaridou (2010) regarding CSR in Europe and how it is implemented strategically. For this reason the strategic planning is crucial to the decision-making procedures of the corporations when the latter undertake CSR activities.

Besides focusing on CSR's internal dimension, at a second level both banks decide which are the main dimensions they need to shift in their CSR strategies. They focus basically on issues that have to do with the protection of the environment, the support to pressuring societal issues and last but not least to the preservation of cultural heritage. Additionally, Alpha Bank lays its activities to issues that regard emerging situations like natural disasters.

These components fully agree with the components that Carroll analyzed in his paper "Corporate Social Responsibility Evolution of a Definitional Construct" in 1999. Both banks try to incorporate CSR activities and make them an integrated part of their overall operating framework.

The initial actions that both banks undertake have to do with the promotion of sustainability, robust economy and continuous growth that enhances the performance and the competitiveness of the banks in the long run. Both Banks first of all adopt practices that help them decrease the negative implications to the environment by its operations. As mentioned above, Piraeus Bank focuses mainly on environmental protection and promotion of green products and investment services whereas, Alpha Bank maintains a balance among the different CSR fields that it takes action into. In addition, according to the interviews, technology appears as a key tool that aids corporations develop alternative channels of distribution that do not harm the environment. As Porter & Kramer mention in their paper "Strategy & Society: The Link between Competitive advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility" technology and innovative pioneering can create shared value both for the company and the society.

Both corporations take into account the four dimensions that are implied in the paper by Husted and Allen (2001). That regards the structure of the banking industry, the existing culture & values of the corporations, the available resources and the related products and services and last but not least the harmonic communication and co-existence with the immediately interrelated parties like consumers, suppliers, government, NGO's, employees and local communities. Beyond this fact, Alpha has presented a more analytical organization of the interested parties around the company than Piraeus Bank.

In order to have the most effective results to the implementation of CSR practices, both corporations try to communicate and engage their stakeholders into the procedure so as to create and develop socially responsible products and services and additionally in this way they avoid extensive governmental controls and inspections, as Metaxas & Tsavdaridou (2010) also argue. They support that one of the benefits that corporations can retrieve from CSR practices implementation is reduction of regulatory oversight and control.

Additionally both companies have created a special CSR department Piraeus Bank firstly established such a Department in 2004, which consists part of the Corporate Governance policy of the bank, whereas Alpha bank has a completely autonomous department of CSR since 2006.

Both banks refused to provide answers with regard to financial issues as to how much money they normally spend on CSR activities and what percentage of their budget CSR constitutes. As regards the limitation of CSR actions due to financial crisis, both banks answered that not only they have not restricted CSR actions but also they support that crisis have created a lot of opportunities. These opportunities can prove to be beneficial for corporations and fund investments that promote sustainable development and prosperity.

To conclude, we can say that:

Corporate social Responsibility constitutes a key and integrated part of both organizations' strategies. In particular, both banks implement CSR actions in the same way and focus in the same fields of action. They take into consideration both the internal and external environment in order to be able to implement CSR practices in an effective way and they both focus primarily to the internal dimension so as to create prolific conditions for CSR actions.

These findings are in agreement with previous studies that have been referred previously in this study.

7. THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The study presented above indicates aspects of CSR and how it is implemented strategically within the Greek Banking Sector .All the findings analyzed above have implications both at a theoretical and managerial level.

At the theoretical level, the current study, further improves the existing literature with regard to CSR strategies and how they are incorporated in the operations of a corporation. In particular, it highlights as a crucial factor the existence of informed and familiar employees that respect and adopt the culture and values of their corporation in order to implement CSR practices efficiently and succeed in CSR activities' expansion. In the article of Porter and Kramer in 2004 it is mentioned that the appropriate culture and values are the most stable foundation for enhanced performance and sustainability.

First, this effort constitutes one among the first studies that focus on CSR strategies and the way that they are implemented in the Greek banking sector. However, Greek banks have demonstrated increased needs and efforts towards enhancing CSR activities. As such, this research sheds additional light on the matter and might enforce banks' efforts towards this direction.

On the other hand, it completes the few studies that exist regarding the Greek context and enriches findings because it demonstrates the inextricable linkage between implemented CSR practices and firms' overall strategies. With regard to these findings, this study provides a new perspective for further examination of CSR practices from the viewpoint of Strategic Management.

At the managerial level, this study informs managers as to how they can allocate the resources available, successfully and in a more effective manner. Moreover, it can be a driver that should indicate a shift to their efforts towards the right direction. This research can be also informative

as to potential challenges and barriers that they might face in the implementation stage of adopted CSR policies like lack of corporate culture, lack of knowledge, poor communication of such practices to the rest of the organization or insufficient engagement of employees. Such factors may have a hindering effect on CSR practices' effectiveness.

Finally, at the policy making level, it provides useful initiatives and directions regarding the creation of sustainable and appropriate solutions that will enhance firms' efforts towards CSR practices in order to create viable conditions and increased standards of living for future generations.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIMENSIONS

The research was realized so as to present at first some general aspects and views around Corporate Social Responsibility and its correlation with strategic dimensions at the Greek banking sector. Furthermore, the qualitative research was an effort to prove that Greek banks, indeed, use and implement CSR practices and expect to have some beneficial implications for the company and consist in the long run a strategic tool for future development and improved competitiveness. Beyond these facts, the results of this research could not be generalized due to some limitations that exist. The sample was too small in order to generalize the results and develop a view on how middle-level bank managers handle CSR issues.

Another obstacle in order to conduct further and more detailed research was time, as it was a three month period in summer time. So the communication with the respondents was very difficult because of their absence for summer vacation. The sublet of my study is very specific and we are not in apposition to say that it could be further generalized in other sectors, industries or contexts.

Future research should focus on expanding the present research effort in the above directions. This could be elaborated either in the same sector by examining all the banks in the Greek context with a representative sample of respondents and all the levels of hierarchy in the company. Moreover it could be expanded in the same sector but in other contexts or in other sectors in the Greek context. Future research could be advanced from studies over an extended

time and be able to justify if implemented CSR practices in real terms will improve a company's competitive position in the market and create a competitive advantage for the firm.

9. CONCLUSION

With this study, a minimum effort was made to prove the existing interaction of implemented CSR practices with the overall strategy in the Greek banking sector. Banks recognize the value that they can acquire both for the company and the society when they adopt CSR policies. In this way, they can obtain significant competitive advantage differentiate themselves from competitors, improve their public image and reputation. It is also important to mention that the firms in order to apply these practices efficiently need to be supported by public institutions and government. However, it is equally significant that they take part in such kind of actions on a voluntary basis as the CSR notion dictates itself. Independently of rewards or honors that they may receive in the long or the short run and independently of various stakeholders' disagreements and demands, corporations are led to a successive implementation of CSR through the adoption of appropriate culture, mentality and values. All these, need to be achieved with continuous training of employees, open discussion among the hierarchical levels of the company and communication and engagement of all the employees in the followed CSR strategy. If appropriate conditions are developed in the corporate world, corporations will increasingly try to include CSR practices to their strategic agenda to make a difference to the society they address their products and services.

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12. APPENDIX

12.1 Questionnaire 1-Piraeus Bank

1. When did your bank started the activities of Corporate Social Responsibility and which where its initial objectives?

“The actions began in 2002 and the main objectives were to achieve sustainable growth and green development”.

2. Do you believe that CSR serves as a management tool that contributes to the sustainable development and viability of the bank?

As referred in the previous question this is the key driver of the CSR policies that are implemented by our institution”.

3. Are there ways with which you try to gain a competitive advantage through sustainability against competitors?

(The bank representative denied answering questions that refer to the competitors)

4. With which ways your bank try to limit the consequences from its operations in issues like waste minimization, recycling, energy saving?

“We use a variety of ways that combine internal and external dimensions. For details you can read our annual report and find more details.”

5. Does your bank make investments so as to minimize the environmental degradation and succeed higher standards of living for future generations?

“All the investments that our bank executes are part of the “green banking” program and deal with investments to alternative sources of energy, ecological constructions and generally products and services which have as an initial objective the protection of the environment.”

6. Does your bank cooperate with its competitors?

(The bank representative denied answering questions that refer to the competitors)

7. Is there in your bank an autonomous CSR department?

“CSR department is part of the Corporate Governance department since 2004.”

8. With which way has your bank incorporated CSR in its overall strategy?

“CSR is an integrated part of our corporate strategy from the beginning of the actions. Our objectives are continuous growth and development. The bank tries to achieve its goals through CSR and in the same ways it serves the social, environmental and community needs. “

9. Are there any problems in the implementation stage of CSR practices?

“Due to the voluntary character of CSR actions the bank invests in such a degree that handles the issue in the more efficient way.”

10. Do you communicate and if yes, in which way the values of your bank to your stakeholders and interested parties?

“Through continuous development and educational programs for our employees and through our “green Branches” for all the other interested parties in order to be informed”

11. Do you motivate your employees to contribute to your CSR actions?

“Our employees are the base that we structure our CSR strategy and their contribution is important to its execution. “

12. Do you create job opportunities to you bank?

“With the adoption of the “Green strategy” we have created multiple job positions of variable specializations in order to develop the CSR department and get the desired results and achieve our initial goals.”

13. Due to financial crisis have you decrease the amounts spent to the CSR actions?

“CSR is an effective tool, and goes in parallel with the general financial objectives of our bank and support them, so from our point view there was no need to decrease the amounts invested in CSR.”

12.2 Questionnaire 2-Alpha Bank

1. When did your bank started the activities of Corporate Social Responsibility and which where its initial objectives?

“The actions of our bank on CSR began in 2001 with main targets to protect the environment, help society and preserve cultural heritage”

2. Do you believe that CSR serves as a management tool that contributes to the sustainable development and viability of the bank?

“CSR create fertile conditions for sustainable development and growth of a stable basis for further growth and enhanced financial performance.”

3. Are there ways with which you try to gain a competitive advantage through sustainability against competitors?

“CSR actions’ initial goals are to support the society and make actions that protect the environment. Competition issues are not a priority for us. “

4. With which ways your bank try to limit the consequences from its operations in issues like waste minimization, recycling, energy saving?

“We have adopted special programs and innovative techniques that minimize the harmful effects that the operations of our group may have to the environment. “

5. Does your bank make investments so as to minimize the environmental degradation and succeed higher standards of living for future generations?

“All the investments that we do has as a main axis the sustainable prosperity of our environment and society that will be beneficial for future generations.”

6. Does your bank cooperate with its competitors?

“No, we have not developed any co-operations except NGO’s.”

7. Is there in your bank an autonomous CSR department?

“Yes there is an autonomous CSR department since 2006.”

8. With which way has your bank incorporated CSR in its overall strategy?

“Our bank has made four commitments in order to incorporate CSR in its overall strategy. These are:

- Benefits from financial products & services that promote development
- Informed and engaged personnel
- High quality and credibility products that incorporate sustainability.
- Implementation of viable solutions for environmental issues. “

9. Are there any problems in the implementation stage of CSR practices?

“Our bank has developed an extensive supporting and auditing network that reassures the effective implementation of CSR practices. “

10. Do you communicate and if yes, in which way the values of your bank to your stakeholders and interested parties?

“Employees are continuously informed in order to incorporate the bank’s values in their personal culture and the same happens with the rest interested parties who are continuously informed with publication reports.”

11. Do you motivate your employees to contribute to your CSR actions?

“Alpha Bank has defined the “Voluntarism Day of Alpha Bank’s employees” where our employees are motivated to participate to CSR actions.”

12. Do you create job opportunities to you bank?

“Alpha Bank creates continuously opportunities for jobs mainly through the expansion of our supply network.”

13. Due to financial crisis have you decrease the amounts spent to the CSR actions?

“CSR practices are adopted voluntarily so until now there was no need to decrease the money spent for CSR as we take actions that we are sure that we can execute. “