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**THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORK
IN THE DIFFUSION OF CSR PRACTICES
AMONG SMES: AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY
IN THE INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS OF LOMBARDY**

by Fabio Antoldi and Alessandra Todisco

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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORK IN THE DIFFUSION OF CSR PRACTICES AMONG SMES: AN EMPIRICAL SURVEY IN THE INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS OF LOMBARDY*

by Fabio Antoldi and Alessandra Todisco

Abstract

Regarding company size, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is generally considered to be almost exclusively a feature of large firms.

Nevertheless, from various studies carried out both in Italy and internationally on CSR practices in SMEs, there emerges a reasonable orientation to CSR by SMEs. However, very little has yet been said regarding socially responsible behaviour adopted by SMEs within industrial districts, which are a peculiar element of the Italian productive system. Districts are a very special organizational context for firms, either because they are based on local networks of firms (connected each to the other by horizontal and vertical relations) or because the peculiar linkages between firms and other social actors of the territory.

The paper presents the main results of a survey on CSR practices among a sample of 834 firms (98,2% of small to medium sized), statistically representing the population of specialized manufacturing firms of the sixteen industrial districts of Lombardy Region, in Northern Italy. Findings confirm the peculiarities of district environment in influencing the socially responsible behaviour of small firms, specially towards stakeholders "internal" to the district. The role of collective bodies of district ("meta-management" organizations) is analysed and discussed too. Finally, the paper proposes a model to interpret and classify CSR practices undertaken by the firms belonging to industrial districts.

1. Introduction

The aim of this research is to analyse the cultural orientation to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the most widespread practices carried out by firms belonging to industrial districts - most of whom are Small and Medium Firms (SME)¹.

Despite the importance of the role that small businesses and industrial districts play in the economy of many countries, and particularly of Italy, the relation between industrial districts and CSR has not yet been explored thorough an empirical investigation. In fact, while the broader

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¹ According to the Green Book of the Commission of the European Community, July 2001, Corporate social responsibility (or CSR) – seen as «*integration on a voluntary basis, by firms, of social and environmental preoccupations in their commercial operations and relations with interested parties*» (European Commission, 2001). CSR is increasingly coming to the attention of the social and political world. The focus of current debate has shifted onto the relationship between CSR and the competitiveness of firms and CSR and different types of enterprise.

subject of socially responsible behaviours of SMEs has been widely researched, both in Italy and abroad, indicating the peculiarity of how CSR policies are practised in small companies, very little, on the other hand, has been empirically demonstrated regarding socially responsible behaviours adopted by companies - especially by SMEs – which specifically belong to industrial districts.

Because of their particular social and corporate nature, industrial districts undoubtedly represent an interesting organizational context in which to analyse the choices and actions undertaken by SMEs regarding CSR. This idea – which is the basis of the research presented here – derives from two observations: the first is that in industrial districts (at least in those in Italy) the “territory” factor is of great importance in determining the individual and collective behaviours of companies which belong to the local system; the second is that, inside such systems, collective, public and private bodies play a peculiar role at the service of the companies in the district.

As regards the first observation, let us remember that according to the economist Giacomo Becattini, the industrial district - in the Italian experience - is *«a socio-territorial entity which is characterised by the active presence of both a community of people and a population of firms in one naturally and historically bounded area. The most important trait of the local community is its relatively homogenous system of values and views, which is an expression of an ethic of work and activity, of the family, of reciprocity and of change (...). Parallel to this system of values, a system of institutions and rules must have developed in such a way as to diffusion those values throughout the district, to support and transmit through generations (...). They are experienced and defined in similar forms and within a framework of a sort of community-like superior interest which becomes an inner principle for the people of the district as a whole»* (Becattini, 1989, p.124). Due to this original permeation through the social, historical and entrepreneurial sides, in industrial districts the relations of companies with stakeholders belonging to the territory are particularly intense, and therefore very different, with respect to what occurs in other types of territorial contexts.

Then, regarding the role of collective bodies inside districts – described by some authors as “meta-management bodies” (Visconti, 2002) – it must be considered that in inter-firm contexts these bodies intervene in favour of companies undertaking activities such as: (a) the identification and suggestion of a common strategic pattern, which is, in the medium-long term, the development of a system of companies; (b) the government of political processes inside the system, regulating the distribution of power, status and resources among the different units that constitute the social system; (c) the promotion and continual renewal of the cultural, strategic and organizational conditions – external to the companies but inside the system – which foster the complete realization of the entrepreneurial potential.

Meta-management district bodies often participate (even if indirectly) in the definition of business and social strategies of single SMEs and produce inside the local system tangible and intangible resources that contribute to reinforcing the competitive advantage of individual firms and the entire district system. Their action, therefore, may also concern the different CSR options which entrepreneurs can choose between.

In more detail, taking into account the structural characteristics of district systems, this research aims to find answers to the following questions: (a) do district SMEs practise CSR? (b) which CSR

practices are usually adopted? (c) and, finally, which role do meta-management organisms play in the promotion of CSR in SMEs?

The answers have been faced with an empirical research carried out in the sixteen districts of Lombardy, in Northern Italy, and the results of the research are hereby presented and discussed.

For a better understanding of the special relationship which binds small firms, their actions regarding CSR and the specificity of the context of industrial districts, in the following paragraphs a review of small businesses orientation to CSR (*cf.* Par. 2) and a brief description of the Italian district model (*cf.* Par. 3) are presented.

2. The CSR practices in small to medium sized firms

Until recently CSR was considered as almost solely the prerogative of large companies. This is mainly due to the identification of social responsibility with the adoption of rather burdensome formalized management systems requiring dedicated human resources, making them difficult to access for smaller firms (Molteni, 2004a). Based on this, we would be inclined to make an overall negative evaluation of the situation and the prospects for social commitment of the Italian economic situation, this being characterised – as noted – by a clear prevalence of small and micro companies.

Nevertheless, if it is true that SMEs lag behind large companies, it is also true that a largely pessimistic vision contrasts with what has been frequently observed regarding the Italian context: (1) the anchoring of many companies to global values – among them Catholic, liberal and socialist – promoters of attention towards the expectations of workers and their families (Rebora, 1984); (2) the diffusion of the cooperative movement; the social impact deriving from industrial districts, that release fundamental functions of development of technical and commercial knowledge, of entrepreneurial culture, services to workers and their families (Belussi, Gottardi and Rullani, 2003); (3) the deep link of companies in their territory; (4) the prevalence of family businesses, where employees often have positive personal interactions (Quinn, 1997).

In Italy, in 2003, the first research on a national level was carried out to outline the state of art of CSR in Italian SMEs (Molteni, 2004a). The investigation – which involved 427 SMEs from throughout the country in manufacturing and services industries – led to two main findings: a) on one hand, the social commitment of Italian SMEs clearly shows that there are areas in need of improvement (for example, the great concentration of decision-making power in the hands of the head of the company, limited career opportunities for women, the small number of voluntary programmes for protecting the environment, the limited knowledge of new kinds of partnerships with the community and social marketing, the limited use of the typical instruments of CSR); b) on the other hand, for Italian SMEs social commitment is not a distant phenomenon which it is only marginally involved in. In fact, if there exist a correlation between orientation to CSR and size, it is also true that, with respect to several subjects, the distance between behaviours of SMEs and those of companies in the larger size group is not wide. This is shown, in particular, by the attention paid to relations with employees and strong relations with the territory and the local community. The research has also highlighted the importance deriving from the ethical control of supply chains and

the early signs of a progressive opening up of family run businesses – which are historically characterized by cultural closure – to involvement of external subjects, in terms of participation in both capital and government (Molteni, 2004a).

At European level, too, some empirical researches reveal a substantially positive picture of the cultural orientation to CSR of SMEs. For example, a report published by the Observatory of European SMEs (European Commission, 2002) shows that about half of European SMEs do make some kind of intervention in favour of the community, even if this commitment may be for the most part occasional and not correlated with corporate strategy.

Nowadays the object of academic, economic and political debate are the possible paths to reinforce the socio-environmental commitment of SMEs. Jenkins (2004b) indicates that a necessary premise to such a discussion is the recognition of the significant differences in the approach to CSR by firms of small and large size; SMEs are not "small large firms" and, therefore, conventional theory on CSR cannot simply be applied on a smaller scale. Basic motivations, implementation procedures, selection of the initiatives to adopt, the subjects responsible for these: regarding all these elements there are important differences between large and small businesses.

With reference to the diffusion of CSR practices, SMEs present, compared to larger firms, some strength, due to the greater flexibility of their governing structures. SMEs, for example, are less subject to pressure from shareholders for short term economic growth and this may give them greater freedom to act to pursue important CSR activities.

Vice versa, obstacles to the diffusion of CSR derive mainly from the lack of financial resources, from the non availability of human resources to dedicate to the evaluation and implementation of CSR initiatives, from the relative importance of the brand and the reputation, from the scarce commitment of top level management, from the prevalently intangible nature of expected benefits from CSR initiatives (for SMEs the trade-off between CSR and profits is often well defined), from the costs and the complex bureaucratic procedures necessary to obtain socio-environmental certification (Jenkins, 2004b). It is even being debated that the diffusion of CSR practices and relative regulations and certification may have a negative impact on the competitiveness of SMEs, which would lead to the raising of entrance barriers in many sectors (Zadek, 2003).

3. Why districts are a special context for the analysis of CSR practices

Industrial districts represent an interesting context for studying the socially responsible practices of firms, because inside them the choices and the behaviours of firms have individual and collective implications. This assumption lies on the particular system of relations that link stakeholders inside the district.

Traditionally, Italian industrial districts are manufacturing systems, extremely localised, constituted of numerous artisan and industrial firms, interconnected by intense relations of both the vertical type, the chain of production, and the horizontal type. They are made up of a large number of firms, prevalently of micro and small size; there is a limited number of middle sized or (less frequently) large firms, which have an important role in the coordination and integration of the smaller ones (Antoldi, 2006 and 2007).

The Italian model of industrial district has its origin in the Marshallian model (Marshall, 1920), which includes, among its elements, the territory - a naturalistic, historic and sociological package; the territory is such an important element of the model that it is possible to affirm that there is an absolute symbiotic relationship between the territory and the productive system. In Italy this is traditionally a limited territory, from a mere tens up to a few hundred square kilometres, which is usually made up of a few neighbouring towns².

If one turns to the local system as a whole, industrial districts are socially complex structures, internally highly articulated, able to generate relations of collaboration not only between firms, but also between these and the other non-economic actors in the territory which they belong to. The district can be represented as a community of people who belong to a common socio-cultural environment and who therefore share language, culture, history, values and meanings, with a common ethic of work and change and implicit rules of behaviour. The practice of reciprocal cooperation between entrepreneurs - which the system of interfirm organization of production relies on - actually derives from the fact that entrepreneurs belong to this social environment, a humus in which economic relations are rooted, impregnating with culture and values not only inter-personal but also interfirm relations (Becattini, 1989; Dei Ottati, 1995).

Considering these particular dynamics inside the district, it is possible to understand how individual values and choices of single entrepreneurs are not the unique (and perhaps neither the principal) rationale of CSR behaviours of districts' SMEs. Intermediary organisations inside the district (such as Chamber of commerce, centres of services, associations, consortium or informal networks) play an important role in supporting responsible business practice. According to recent literature on SMEs and CSR, we must refer to this level as the "*meso-level*" of analysis, which is positioned between the "*micro-level*" of CSR issues related to entrepreneurship and the "*macro-level*" of CSR issues, related to sustainable growth, sustainable development and competitiveness of economic systems (Spence, 1999; Moore and Spence, 2006).

More generally, it is clear that underlying the virtuous functioning of this social organization (but also its productive aspect) there is high social capital, with a rich network of relations between the actors, people, groups, firms, institutions, that may also be expressed in high levels - above the average - of civil participation, civilness, and generalized confidence (Colemann, 1988; Putnam, 1993a and 1993b).

Actually, firms belonging to industrial districts often - when making decisions and doing business - act as a member of a network of firms. Studies on networks of firms have demonstrated that networks often give their members an additional competitive advantage, based both on the social capital and relational capital that link the network and the continuous transfer of knowledge

² For example, the sixteen industrial districts of the Lombardy Region on which the research is focused extend overall over an area that covers 16% of the national territory, in which almost a quarter of Lombardy's population lives, and in this territory over 454 thousand workers are employed in manufacturing, 36% of the regional total (of these almost 174 thousand are occupied in specialization sectors of districts). However, each of these have very variable territorial, demographical and productive aspects that go, for example, from the 32.6 sq.km. of the Lecchese clothing district to the over 800 sq.km. of the Valli Bresciane district, and from the little over 35 thousand inhabitants of the Montichiari district to the over 450 thousand population of Brianza. These last two districts are also at the two extremes for the number of manufacturing workers, with 6,500 and 76,000 respectively.

between the members of these inter-firm (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Molina-Morales and Martínez-Fernández, 2003; Adler and Kwon, 2002).

In inter-firm networks, social capital facilitates the transfer of knowledge between members, promotes the creation of intellectual capital in the individual firms and enables them to obtain an additional advantage in markets (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Jarrillo, 1988).

Industrial districts belong to this kind of network too, and are largely comparable to other forms of strategic networks such as inter-firm networks, franchising networks, strategic alliances, R&D consortiums and trade associations.

Compared to other different types of districts, the Italian model has some unique features, that nowadays appear very relevant in order to understand the choices of the firms in the field of socially responsible behaviours. In the “Italianate variant” of Marshallian industrial districts, the business structure is dominated by small, locally owned firms; key investment decisions are made locally; firms act on the basis of long-term contracts and with high commitment between local buyers and suppliers; firms cooperate also with local competitors in sharing risk, stabilizing market, sharing innovation; the workers in general are strongly committed to their district (there is high level of labour in-migration, but low level of out-migration); there is an evolution of unique local cultural identity; trade associations are strong and provide shared infrastructure (for instance management, training, marketing, technical and financial help); local government is strongly involved in regulating and promoting core industries (Markusen, 1996, pag. 298).

The fact that industrial districts are firm networks, with a high level of social capital, has an important impact on the diffusion of CSR and the behaviours of firms. SMEs are embedded in the local community and their resources, their competences, their competitive advantage and finally success are often related to their degree of legitimacy and approval from local stakeholders, including employees, public authorities, financial organizations, banks, suppliers and citizens (Perrini, 2006).

Of course, it is a common phenomenon to other forms of firm networks and inter-firm organizations, but that is emphasised much more in the case of districts because of their original link with the local community (Spence et al. 2003).

For this reason the theory of social capital – together with stakeholder theory – provide a useful basis in order to understand the attitudes and the behaviour of SMEs inside districts: *«through their social capital SMEs are able to promote career success and executive compensation, help workers find jobs, create more intellectual capital, strengthen relations with suppliers, encourage information sharing among firms and facilitate entrepreneurship»* (Perrini, 2006, pag. 312).

In a similar context, for better understanding the behaviours of SMEs it is necessary to take into account that:

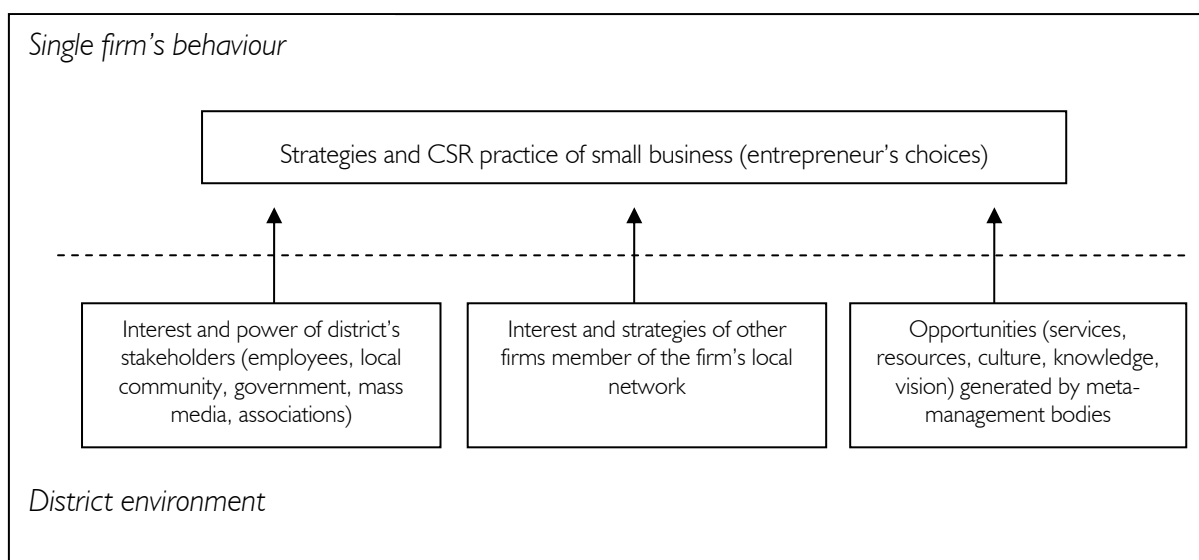
1. a single firm is an active part of a territory, with a strong social and cultural identity, in which there is an important permeation of the economic productive field and the social one, and in which relations with local stakeholders are particularly intense;
2. in a local system, apart from the firms, there are very active collective organizations which provide services for the firms and the meta-management of the whole system (chambers of commerce, district committees, services, research and training centres etc.);

3. being districts mainly constituted of micro or small firms, in many cases in the territory there is a preponderance of fragile entrepreneurship, with few resources, far from final markets and clients, because they are specialized suppliers of the few district firms really aimed at the final market.

These conditions mean that many strategic and operative choices of small entrepreneurs (including those in the area of CSR practices) are strongly influenced by pressures from the other actors in the territory: the other firms which they have production chain relations with, the collective organizations, the local community and stakeholders (Figure 1).

For convenience, for imitation, for necessity or by obligation, the entrepreneur, by being involved in the social life of the territory, has no choice but to accept the ties and the opportunities offered by the local district system.

Fig. 1: The forces of the district which influence the choices of the small entrepreneur on CSR issues



4. The research on SMEs and their CSR practice in Lombardy's industrial districts

On the basis of the review of the international literature dedicated to the subject of CSR, of small firms and industrial districts - partly summarised in the previous paragraph - the following hypothesis have been stated.

Hp1) The first hypothesis is that, inside districts, due to the peculiar system of relations that binds the economic actors to the other social actors, *firms tend to adopt, more intensely than firms that do not belong to districts, socially responsible behaviour towards stakeholders which belong to their community* (for example employees, citizens, intermediate organizations of the local community) and *they are also particularly active in the defence of the environment which they belong to*. This hypothesis will be able to be verified, or not, comparing socially responsible behaviours of district firms with those of other firms that do not belong to local contexts of this kind.

Hp2) The second hypothesis underlying this research holds that, since the population of firms of industrial districts is prevalently constituted of small and medium sized firms, it is reasonable to suppose that *social responsibility is not pursued through explicitly coded and rational attitudes and*

behaviours, but rather, implicitly, informally and sometimes even not completely consciously, because it originates from ethical or social reasons rather than the research of corporate advantages. This hypothesis can be verified (or disproved) by evaluating the typology of CSR activity practised by the firms, the external communication of CSR activities in order to make the efforts undertaken visible to stakeholders and, finally, the evaluation of potential tangible benefits for the firm, in terms of effectiveness and efficiency.

Hp3) The third hypothesis comes from consideration that - faced with an increasingly unfavourable international competitive context - district firms are increasingly selecting strategies aimed at improving the quality of their production and investing in innovation and brand image. In such strategic context, the reputation of the district system can often play just as important a role as that of the firm itself, because it constitutes an intangible asset which differentiation strategies in international markets can be based on. Therefore, it is considered that, in this new competitive scenario, *the adoption of appropriate CSR policies can also positively influence the construction of an image to differentiate the district and its firms.* This hypothesis will be verified by evaluating if and how much firms deliberately adopt CSR policies in order to improve their competitive position in markets.

Hp4) The fourth hypothesis, finally, considers the fact that, in many Italian districts, collective local actors of meta-management (such as district service centres, development agencies, chambers of commerce, etc) are trying to actively sustain the competitiveness of their district and the district's SMEs, offering activities of information, training, company consultancy and promotion of productions in foreign markets, aiming to offer district firms (particularly smaller ones) a series of advanced services that they would have difficulty producing themselves. Precisely because *these collective bodies are often the principal promoters of policies and initiatives at a systemic level, it is hypothesised that they also play a primary role in the diffusion of CSR practices among district firms, especially in small ones.*

This hypothesis will be able to be verified if firms recognise having benefited from consistent support from these bodies with knowledge of and the adoption of CSR policies.

The empirical research was carried out on a sample of 834 firms (of which 819 of small to medium sizes), belonging to the 16 industrial districts officially recognised by the Lombardia Region. The sample (Table 1) was extracted, respecting a criterion of statistical relevance, from a population of 3.929 firms with at least 10 employees operating in industrial districts in Lombardy, according to the ISTAT census of 2001. Micro firms (of 1 to 9 employees) were intentionally excluded from the study, in so much as they were held to be less aligned and unsuitable for the contents and methodology of the research. Of the 834 firms that participated, 723 (87%) are small firms, with a number of employees of between 10 and 49; another 96 are medium sized firms, with 50-249 employees; while the remaining 15 firms (around 2%) are large, with over 250 employees.

The firms were contacted and interviewed using CATI methodology (Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing) in September 2006. The interviews were based on a questionnaire formulated according to the four hypothesis stated before.

Tab. 1 Composition of the sample interviewed and its relevance with reference to the population of the 16 districts belonging to the sectors of territorial specialization (processing based on Istat data, 2001).

Industrial District			Population	Sample				
N°	District name	Business sector	N° of firms	Small	Medium	Large	Total	% Sample /Population
1	Valle dell'Arno	Production and metal working	97	11	-	2	13	13%
2	Lecchese	Production and metal working	475	89	17	1	107	23%
3	Valli Bresciane	Production and metal working	901	172	26	7	205	23%
4	Serico Comasco	Clothing	351	66	9	2	77	22%
5	Valseriana	Clothing	145	29	2	2	33	23%
6	Castelgoffredo	Hosiery	174	37	1	-	38	22%
7	Bassa Bresciana	Leather and footwear	41	8	1	-	9	22%
8	Sebino	Rubber and plastic	128	25	3	-	28	22%
9	Est Milanese	Electrical, electronic and medical appliances	212	13	6	-	19	9%
10	Brianza	Furniture and fixtures	553	127	8	1	136	25%
11	Bergamasca	Clothing and accessories	238	45	6	-	51	21%
12	Lecchese Tessile	Clothing	55	12	1	-	13	24%
13	Bassa Bresciana	Clothing	56	9	5	-	14	25%
14	Gallaratese	Clothing	254	51	8	-	59	23%
15	Vigevanese	Footwear machinery	217	26	3	-	29	13%
16	Casalasco Viandese	Wood	32	3	-	-	3	9%
Total			3929	723	96	15	834	20%

5. The main results of the research

5.1 The CSR practices most adopted by the district firms

The attitude of district firms towards CSR was investigated in the questionnaire with reference to the five traditional CSR areas (Molteni 2004c): relations with employees, relations with the local community, socially responsible management of relations with suppliers, communication activities and marketing correlated with CSR and, finally, initiatives to protect the environment. Their answers are entirely reported in Table 2.

With reference to *relations with employees*, the CSR initiatives investigated are: the willingness of the firm to offer employees flexible working hours, the possibility of taking leave, the availability of loans at favourable rates, the offer of supplementary health care, the organization of trips and sports events for employees, and the provision of child day-care centres.

Overall, 72.5% of the sample adopted at least one of the initiatives investigated. Even higher levels were reached in the three districts specialized in clothing industry, with large numbers of female workers. Compared to analogous research, carried out in populations of firms not bound to territorial ambits as peculiar as districts, this is a significantly higher percentage. For example,

from an analogous study carried out in 2006 by the "Observatory on Small Firms from Milan" on a similar sample of SMEs in Lombardy, not belonging to industrial districts, it emerges that only 42.3% adopt at least one CSR initiative in favour of employees (ALTIS, 2006).

Specifically, the most common initiatives in firms are flexible hours (56.6%) and the possibility of taking leave (41.7%). Following these were subsidized loans (16.4%) and supplementary health cover (15.2%). Only a few firms organize trips and sports events (4.9%) and the number in the sample offering child day-care centres is negligible (0.2%).

It is notable that a good 53.5% of the firms studied (446 of 834) employ non-EU workers. And many of these claim to be actively involved in the integration of non-EU immigrants into the local community, through, for example, helping in finding accommodation (151 firms, which is 33.9% of all those employing non-EU workers) or specific training and educational activities (129 firms, 28.9% of the total). Much smaller is the number of firms that directly organize Italian courses (only 15 firms).

Analysis of the answers was carried out taking into account possible differences due to the size of firms. Regarding relations with employees, it must be underlined that a propensity to CSR initiatives in favour of employees increases as the size of firms increases, except in the case of flexible hours, where there are no significant differences connected to size.

Regarding *relations of firms with the local community*, activities considered socially responsible and therefore investigated are: sponsoring of sports and cultural events (locally and not), donations to institutions or individuals for social benefit, sales to non-profit organizations or to individuals in need of its products free or at favourable rates, offering the use of its premises/machinery for short periods for social benefit, offering the free use of its employees to realize special projects, the purchase of goods and services from individuals that undertake activities of social interest, the purchase from bodies/associations concerned about public welfare of Christmas presents for clients or employees, and other initiatives.

In total 71.2% of the sample have adopted at least one of the initiatives investigated. Here too, regarding analogous research undertaken in populations of firms not bound to territorial ambits as peculiar as districts, it is a significantly higher percentage. For example, in the already cited research of the "Observatory on Small Firms from Milan" it emerged that only 59.2% of that sample adopted at least one CSR initiative in favour of the community (ALTIS, 2006).

Tab. 2 The answers of the firms to questions concerning CSR practices towards employees, local community, supply chain management, marketing and communication policies and environment.

	Number of firm	in %
TOTAL	834	100,0%
CSR practices towards EMPLOYEES		
• Flexible hours	472	56,6%
• Child day-care centres	2	0,2%
• Supplementary health cover	127	15,2%
• Trips, sport events, socio cultural activities	41	4,9%
• Possibility of taking leave	348	41,7%
• Subsidized loans	137	16,4%
• None	229	27,5%
• Non EU workers	446	53,5%
CSR practices towards LOCAL COMMUNITY		
• Sponsoring of sports and cultural events	310	37,2%
• Donations	371	44,5%
• Offer of products free of charge or at favourable conditions	160	19,2%
• Lending of company equipments	50	6,0%
• Donation of company equipments	44	5,3%
• Employees working hours for community projects	30	3,6%
• Purchase of goods/services which benefit public welfare	106	12,7%
• Purchase of Christmas gifts from organization concerned about public welfare	222	26,6%
• Other	6	0,7%
CSR practices concerning SUPPLY CHAIN		
• Requirement of certification	255	30,6%
• Self-certification	153	18,3%
• ISO	165	19,8%
• Certification of product/service quality	136	16,3%
• Certification of correctness of waste disposal	69	8,3%
• Ethic code	17	2,0%
• SA8000	4	0,5%
• Other	8	1,0%
CSR practices concerning MARKETING AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION		
• Advertising containing messages with social value	28	3,4%
• CRM	18	2,2%
• Products of environmental value	99	11,9%
• Products of social value	40	4,8%
• External communication and CSR initiatives (through articles, advertising, conferences)	54	6,5%
• Sustainability report	30	3,6%
CSR practices concerning ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES		
• Reduction of energy consumption	293	35,1%
• Development of alternative energy sources	48	5,8%
• Reduction of water consumption	200	24,0%
• Reduction of consumption of raw materials	218	26,1%
• Recycling of packaging materials	360	43,2%
• Use of clean technologies/other than legal requirements	148	17,7%
• Reduction of polluting emissions/other than legal requirements	186	22,3%
• Treatment/disposal of waste/other than legal requirements	283	33,9%
• Noise reduction/other than legal requirements	235	28,2%
• Mobility management	97	11,6%
• Green procurement	101	12,1%
• Other	0	0,0%
• Cert. ISO 14001	83	10,0%
• EMAS	23	2,8%
• OHSAS 18000	136	16,3%
• Ecological certification	78	9,4%
• Analysis of life cycle of product	89	10,7%

In detail, the most common initiatives are: donations (44.5%), sponsorship of sports and cultural events (37.2%), the purchase of Christmas presents from organizations that are concerned about public welfare (26.6%). Then follow, giving away products free or at favourable rates (19.2%) and the purchase of goods and services from organizations that undertake activities of social benefit (13.7%). There were very few other initiatives.

Finally, as already established for relations with employees, also from the answers given about relations with the community it emerges that a propensity towards socially responsible behaviours increases in relation to the size of firms.

Regarding *relations with suppliers*, the firms interviewed were asked in particular if they normally requested some form of certification of the social or environmental correctness of the productive processes undertaken by their suppliers.

Only 30.6% of the sample (255 firms of 834), answered affirmatively, thus demonstrating their sensitivity to the subject of ethical principles in the supply chain.

Overall, from the answers it emerges, therefore, that there is limited attention to the supply chain. On the other hand, it must be remembered that, despite the increase of the phenomena of productive delocalisation and/or extra-district supplying, for many Lombard districts the productive chain remains highly concentrated within the bounds of the district. This situation makes it less necessary for downstream firms to have certification regarding the social behaviour of upstream suppliers, since, being part of the community, they are already subject to direct social control by the community to which they belong.

The firms that request certification from their suppliers were then asked to specify which form of documentation they asked for. It resulted that 58.5% of them (165 firms of 255) formally request ISO certification, 60.0% (153 firms) are content with self-certification, 53.3% (136 firms) ask for certification of the quality of the product or service and 27.1% (69 firms) ask for certification regarding the correct disposal of waste. A propensity to request documents from suppliers, attesting to the social correctness of productive processes increases as the size of firms increases. In small firms self-certification is more often requested.

Regarding *practices of communication and corporate marketing related with CSR*, the presence of the following initiatives in the firms in the sample was evaluated: advertising campaigns containing messages of social value, marketing campaigns to raise funds for a social cause (Cause Related Marketing), the presence in the commercial offer of the firm of products which are known for their social or environmental relevance, external communication of CSR initiatives undertaken (through articles, advertising, conferences, etc.), and finally the drafting of a sustainability balance (or social, environmental, ethical, etc. balance).

In total, only 22.8% of the sample (190 of 834 firms) adopt at least one of the initiatives of marketing and communication investigated. In this case also - as already for relations with suppliers - percentages of the diffusion of these practices are lower than those found with reference to CSR practices in favour of the local community.

Going on to examine in detail which activities are undertaken by firms that declared that they had adopted one of these initiatives, 99 of them (52.1% of 190) claim to include in their offer system products of environmental relevance and 54 firms (28.4%) have communicated their CSR

activities externally. There are 40 (21.1%) firms that offer products with social relevance, while 30 (15.6%) draw up a sustainability balance, 28 (14.7%) have run advertising campaigns containing messages of social value and finally, only 18 (9.5%) have launched marketing campaigns to raise funds for a social cause.

As already for other aspects of CSR investigated, also in this case there is a positive relationship between initiatives of communication and marketing with social relevance and the size of firms, particularly as regards their position on communicating their CSR initiatives externally (the larger is the firm, the higher is the intensity of communication).

Regarding *environmental responsibility*, the following initiatives of corporate environmental management were investigated: the adoption of programmes for the development of alternative energy, programmes for reducing water consumption, programmes for reducing consumption of raw materials, programmes for recycling packaging materials of products sold, programmes for using clean technologies beyond those legally obligatory, programmes for the treatment and/or disposal of waste beyond those legally obligatory, programmes for reducing noise beyond those legally obligatory, programmes for mobility management, green procurement programmes for the selection of suppliers, and other initiatives.

In total, 72.0% of the sample adopted at least one of the initiatives investigated. Once more, compared with analogous research undertaken in populations of firms not bound to territorial ambits as peculiar as districts, it is a significantly higher percentage. Similar research undertaken in 2006 by "Observatory on Small Firms from Milan", for example, indicated that only 6.8% of them adopted an environmental management initiative.

In detail, the most common environmentally respectful initiatives in the sample of district firms investigated are programmes for recycling packaging materials of products (43.2%), followed by programmes for the treatment and/or disposal of waste beyond those legally obligatory (33.9%), programmes for noise reduction beyond those legal obligatory (28,2%). Just after these are programmes for reducing consumption of raw materials (26.1%), programmes for reducing water consumption (24.0%) and those for reducing polluting emissions beyond those legally obligatory, (22,3%), programmes for the use of clean technologies beyond those legally obligatory (17,7%). Mobility management and green procurement are respectively 11.6% e al 12.1% and finally, only 5.8% of firms adopt programmes for the development of alternative energy.

Still regarding the environment, the presence of the following certification was investigated; ISO14001, EMAS, OHSAS18000, ecological certification and analysis of the life cycle of the product. Here too the answers were quite positive: 31.9% of the sample (266 of 834 firms) have at least one of these certifications.

In detail, of these 266 firms, 51% hold certification OHSAS18000, 33% analysis of the product's life cycle, 29% ecological certification and 9% EMAS certification.

Overall, compared to analogous research undertaken in populations of firms not bound to territorial ambits as peculiar as districts, the percentages found for programmes of environmental management and certifications are significantly higher (from research in 2006 by the Altis Observatory on Small firms from Milan, for example, it emerges that in a sample of 835 firms, only

6.8% adopt at least one programme of environmental management and only 0.01% hold an environmental certification).

In this area of investigation too, the larger the size of the firm the greater attention is paid to environmental problems and the greater recourse to programmes of environmental management and certifications. It seems appropriate to underline that OHSAS18000 certification (certification regarding health and safety) is more common in small firms.

5.2 The benefits district firms receive from behaviours inspired by CSR

A legitimate question that can be stated is for what reason should firms carry out voluntary practices of social and environmental content, which, in the short term, may involve corporate management in an additional source of commitments.

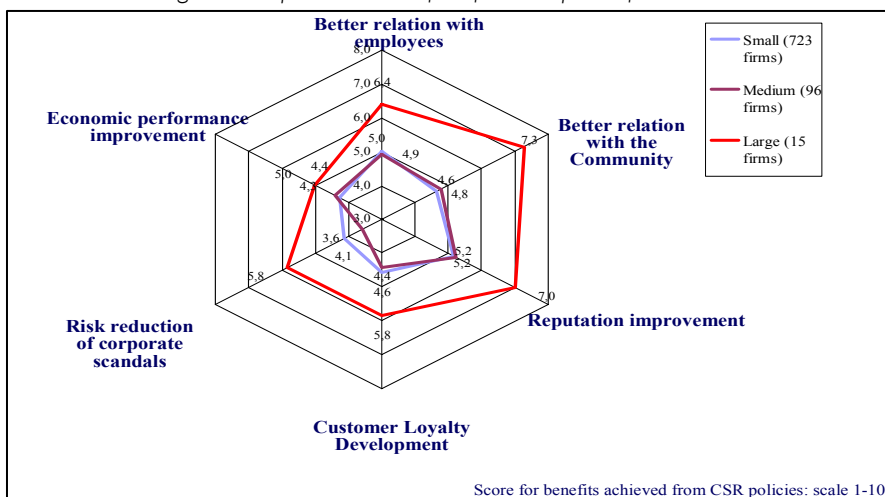
An indirect way to understand the motivations that drive an individual firm to choose to activate initiatives of this type is to evaluate the perception that firms have of the direct advantages accruing from their CSR choices.

For this reason the firms in the sample were asked to indicate what, in their view, were the benefits generated by social and environmental initiatives undertaken by their firms, regarding different aspects of performance (Figure 2).

The answers indicate that the perceived benefits from firms are rather scarce, always below the adequacy threshold. In fact they appear a little higher regarding enhancement of corporate reputation (average score 5.20) and promotion of collaborative relations with employees (5.04), less as regards improvement of relations with the community (4.71), development and/or client retention (4.48) improvement of economic performance (4.30) and reduction of risks of scandals or corporate crises (4.10). The advantages on competitive dimensions (i.e. performance indicators related to profit, corporate reputation and customer loyalty) are more evident for largest companies, very weaker for SMEs.

It should be noted that an important role in the perception of the benefits of CSR is played by the size of the firm: while for small and medium sized firms judgements are substantially aligned, the 15 firms interviewed which had more than 249 employees, declared a higher level of satisfaction (sometimes much higher) in all areas.

Fig. 2 - The perceived benefits of the adoption of CSR initiative



5.3 The role of district meta-management organizations in the choices of firms

One of the key hypotheses underlying the research is that - differently from that which occurs in firms which operate in markets as single firms - in local systems of firms, a determining role in the processes of adoption of socially responsible behaviours is played by meta-management organizations: service centres for firms, chambers of commerce, local entrepreneurial associations, etc.

These organizations, in fact, inside the local entrepreneurial network, often act, on the one hand, to orient a firm towards the adoption of innovative strategies and practices, and on the other produce external economies that lower the costs of adoption and allow even small actors to access solutions which otherwise - because of high costs - would only be the prerogative of large firms.

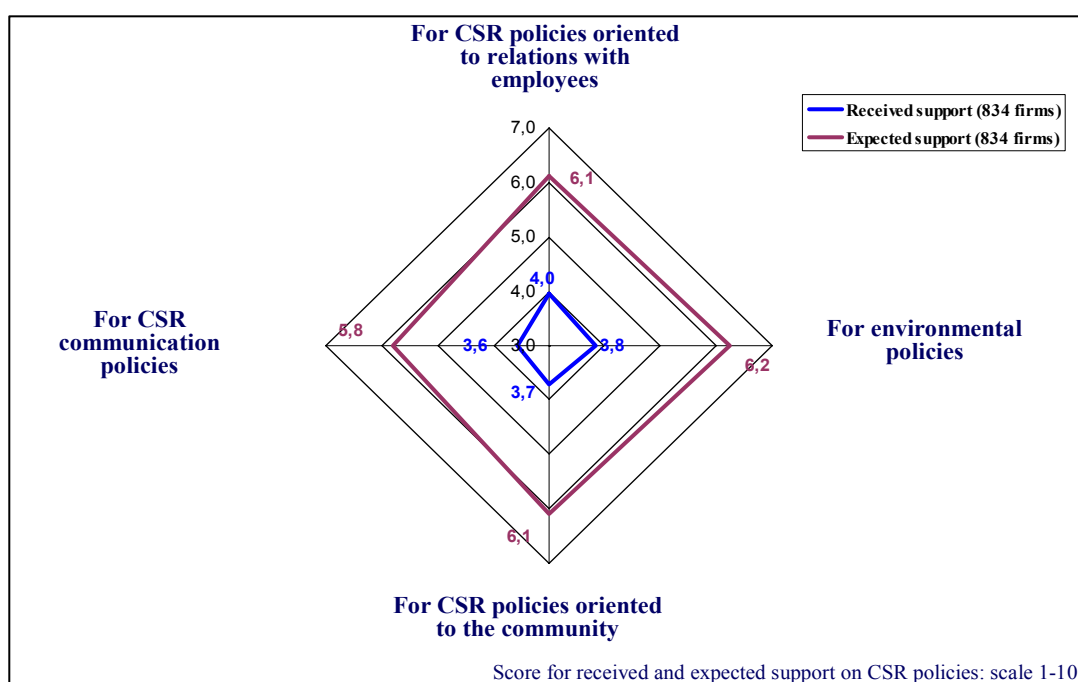
This research therefore investigated firstly if, and how much, district organizations in recent years have helped local firms to move towards a culture oriented to CSR and to implement instruments and activities of CSR. This question is justified by the fact that, in several Italian industrial districts, policies of this type have been proposed and realized successfully by district organizations.

In particular, the firms were expressly asked to give a judgement related to the support actually received from meta-management bodies in their district in adopting CSR activities towards employees, environment, local community and the adoption of communication policies correlated with CSR (for example the production of a district social balance or integration of CSR in collective brand policies in the district)

Overall the results in districts in Lombardy are, however, decidedly disappointing and much worse than the most pessimistic forecast.

In fact, in the opinion of the interviewees (Figure 4) the average overall judgement of firms in merit of the support given by meta-management organizations for the development of CSR is only 3.77 on a scale that goes from 1 (= no support) to 10 (= maximum support).

Fig. 4 – The interviewees' assessment about expected and received support given by "meta-management" bodies in promoting CSR practices among district firms



More specifically, the support is slightly higher for CSR practices towards collaborators (3.96) and towards the environment (3.84), and lower as regards CSR towards the local community (3.70) and even worse for communication (3.56). These are, in any case, scores well below the adequacy threshold.

This is evidence of the fact that there is still much more that must be done by territorial organizations to help district firms to move towards CSR.

These same data, analysed individually district by district, do not show substantial variations, inasmuch as at any rate the overall average judgement of the firms is always in the range between 2.75 and 4.45. A slight difference emerges, however, if the answers to this question are analysed taking the size of the firms into account: the overall average judgement (which as has been stated was 3.77 for the entire sample) rises from the 3.74 of the 634 firms interviewed with 10-49 employees to 3.81 for the 89 firms with 50-249 employees and reaches 4.77 for the 13 firms which have over 250 employees.

The very negative overall judgement on the actions of meta-management organizations as facilitators of the adoption of CSR practices in districts would not seem to have any regional differences, while it appears to correlate slightly with the size of firms.

With a second, specific question we also wanted to investigate to what extent firms believe nonetheless that it is useful and important that such organizations play a role of support for the diffusion of CSR practices, thus clarifying what expectations firms harbour from the collective actors in their territory.

The negative judgement regarding the (lack of) support given by the organizations is even more significant when compared with the results for this question.

On a scale from 1 (= no usefulness) to 10 (= maximum usefulness) with a score of 6.06 the firms interviewed judged that overall it was useful that these organizations supported them in adopting CSR. This usefulness is greater for CSR practices towards the environment (6.23), ten towards collaborators (6.11) and towards the local community (6.08). Much less for support for firms in adopting communication policies connected with CSR (5.81).

The data disaggregated by territory show some districts with higher expectations, others apparently less interested in receiving help from district organizations. Here too the size of firms is an influencing factor, although not particularly strongly and in a direction that may seem unexpected: expectations of help from meta-management organizations increase the bigger the firm, going from 6.02 to 6.23 and finally, to 6.45 for small medium and large firms, respectively.

To conclude, there is a significant gap between the average judgement of actions of organizations in supporting the diffusion of CSR practices (overall 3.77) and the average expectations of help (overall 6.06) that firms harbour. This is an important gap in which policies of promotion of CSR particularly towards SMEs could find a place.

If it is confirmed that there is an unheeded request for help from district meta-management organizations by firms in merit of the diffusion of CSR practices, it is interesting to know to whom exactly this request is addressed.

The research therefore asked firms which are – in their view – the organizations in the district that should play an incisive role in the diffusion of CSR practices, making them choose from a list

including the district committee, the service centre for firms, the local public development agency, the Chamber of Commerce in the province (and its associates), entrepreneurial associations (industrial and artisan), universities and research centres and training centres in the territory. The interviewees could also give multiple answers and were free to indicate any other organizations, not included in the list, that they deemed suitable to support firms to implement CSR practices.

Out of 834 firms, 715 replied to this question. For these firms, the organizations that more than others should involve themselves in the diffusion of CSR practices are entrepreneurial associations (70.6% of respondents), followed some way behind by Chambers of Commerce (49.0%) and then by training centres (31.2% and universities and research centres (30.5%). These last two clearly indicate that also organizations that produce knowledge – and not services – are considered important actors to satisfy the needs of firms.

Much less important, on the other hand, are the percentages for district service centres (21.0%), public development agencies (16.6%) and district committees (16.1%).

Finally, to complete the picture of the actors nominated by the interviewees, among the organizations included under “Others” (3.6% of respondents) the most common are public territorial organizations – the Region, the Province or the Municipality – which were nominated 15 times, and private consultants, with 6 mentions.

Analysed district by district, then, the answers of the firms in truth seem to reflect some differences due to varying local contexts, with values sometimes significantly different from each other.

Limiting the analysis to districts with larger populations, it is clear, in particular, that in some situations the Chambers of Commerce seem to be directly requested by firms to carry out an even more incisive role. This is the case, for example, in the two districts of Lecco (one specialized in clothing and one in metal working), where the Chamber of Commerce is indicated as a privileged interlocutor on this subject by 66.7% and 60.2% of interviewees, although the role of entrepreneurial associations remains predominant.

On the other hand, on the whole districts in Brescia expect less from entrepreneurial associations, but with values only a little below the average, and in particular they expect less from the Chamber of Commerce (in one district, for example, this falls as low as 47.1%).

Service centres in the district, finally, emerge as important interlocutors for firms, especially in Castelfreddo (36.1%) and the silk district of Comasco (25.4%).

Overall, the answers given by firms with reference to the role of meta-management organizations outline a scenario that is far from expected. It seems clear, above all, that the answer to the information, training and operational needs of firms regarding CSR is sought decidedly more in the private arena than the public. Further, that also the role of centres of production of knowledge (universities, research centres, training centres) can play an important role for firms, greater – for example – than that recognised for organizations more tied to the public or political areas (development agencies, district committees). These are considerations which are worth taking into account during the drafting of industrial policies in support of firms, since they would seem to confirm the usefulness of acting in this field following a logic of subsidiarity towards the private rather than a direct offer of services to support firms by public organizations.

6. District firms and CSR choices: an interpretive model

Either the empirical evidences from the survey and the results of additional in depth interviews that we are still carrying on in the districts let us interpret and classify CSR practices undertaken by firms in districts (especially SMEs) applying two basic criteria.

The first area of analysis concerns the initial promoter of CSR policies implemented by the SMEs. There are in fact some policies (for example much of treatment of employees) which are often assumed autonomously and spontaneously by individual firms, independently of their size or history. Other aspects, however, are more easily classifiable as operations promoted by, guided by, sometimes financed by meta-management firms (service centres, chambers of commerce, etc.) and firms often act collectively also in order to reap the advantages of economies outside the district and avoid the costs of adopting these practices inside the firm .

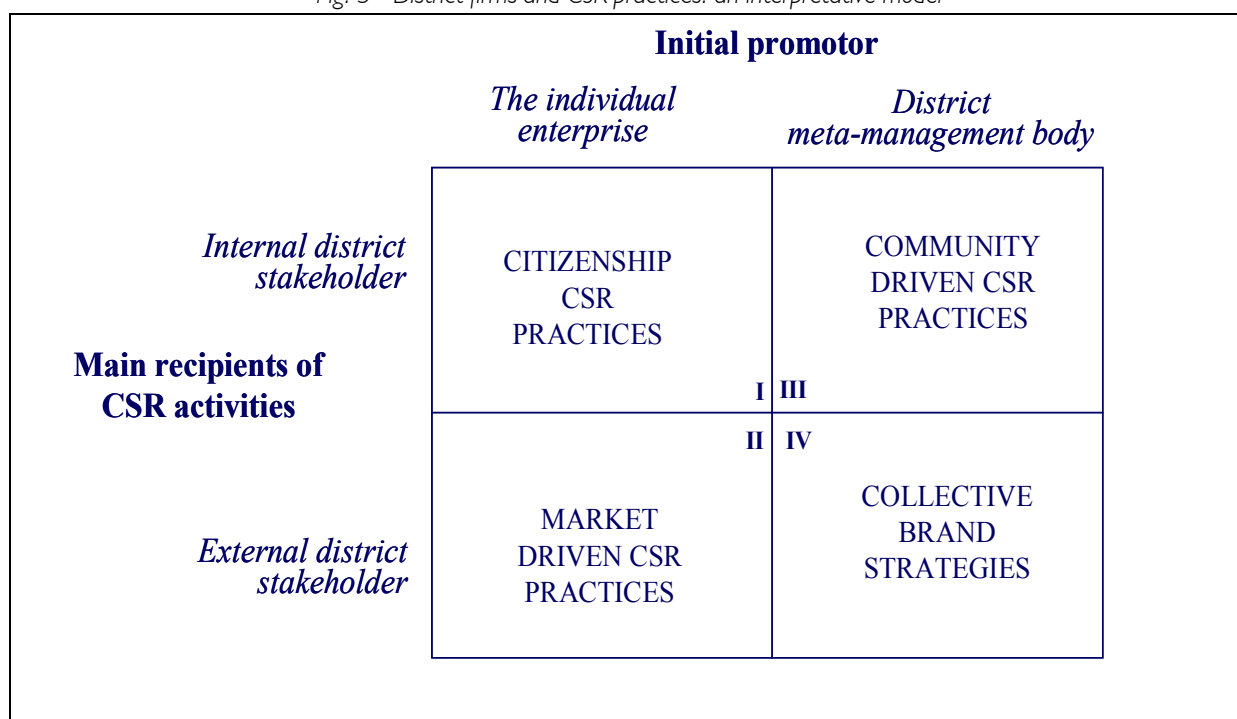
Secondly, we must consider the recipients of CSR policies of the firms. There is no doubt, in fact, that - due to the particular ties which bind firms to the local community - there is a kind of territorial, geographic, physical and psychological barrier which distinguishes relations with the stakeholders inside the district (including the staff, local bodies, the civil and religious community, the local bank...) from the stakeholders who, on the other hand, appear external to the local community (including the final customers, other banks, national governing bodies, national or international public opinion...).

Crossing the two variables of analysis, obtains a matrix which enables us to appreciate the different CSR practices of the SMEs adopted in district firms (Figure 5).

a) *Citizenship CSR practices*: are those that small entrepreneurs spontaneously (and often casually, informally and with little awareness) have always undertaken simply because they feel part of and citizens of their district's community. In this class we can include donations to non-profit organizations and local institutions, more for patronage than self-interest. Further we must remember that most initiatives for the benefit of employees are because entrepreneurs and the families of their employees are part of the same community, which encourages the adoption of practices which benefit workers. These CSR practices for the SMEs of the district are spontaneous.

b) *Market driven CSR practices*: contrarily, some firms have recently realized that some CSR practices give them better opportunities in the final market because they are appreciated by customers. This is particularly true in the area of certification (environmental, social welfare, ethical) inside determined production processes in which SMEs operate as BtoB suppliers, or for foreign business brokers in which CSR practices are important in order to identify suppliers (for example for some retail chains in European countries). This can, however, also be of value to final customers, who are perhaps sensitive to ecological matters, and may appreciate, for example, products in a range with ecological value. In this case the CSR has a strategic value for the individual firm, and is an element of its individual competitive strategies. Further, it is often introduced as an element which is different from what competitors in the district offer. These are mostly initiatives developed in the larger firms of the district, with more sophisticated marketing skills and which are more aware of customer requirements, and they are not easy to find in SMEs.

Fig. 5 - District firms and CSR practices: an interpretative model



3) *Community driven CSR practices*: These are initiatives which have a strong impact on the local community, which meta-management organizations (and particularly those in which influence from the public sector is strong, like district committees) propose and promote to the population of local firms in order to maintain or improve the level of wellbeing of the inhabitants of the territory where the district is situated. They respond to a public interest, the common good. They are the choices - which go beyond laws - inherent in problems like pollution (acoustic and environmental), waste disposal, mobility, energy consumption, etc. Concerns that in the district context can be confronted and resolved better than elsewhere due to the positive relationship between firms and institutions. District firms adopt them, to a greater extent than firms outside the district, on one hand because it is more convenient due to the coordination and facilitation which the collective organization undertakes to the benefit of individual firms (public planning, public finance fund-raising and the sharing of fixed costs on projects which generate savings for individual firms), and on the other hand because local institutions play a role of moral suasion for local entrepreneurs that makes withdrawal from projects difficult. It is clear that these practices have a purely social value, aimed at improving the wellbeing of the local population.

4) *Collective brand CSR strategies*: these practices also prevalently answer a logic of market oriented CSR, but are different from "Market driven CSR practices" because, unlike the former, they are inside collective marketing projects promoted by meta-management organizations, often undertaken to benefit SMEs. Examples of collective marketing are district collective brands, guarantees of protection for consumers which certify the origin of products from the district. In this prospective are also collocated initiatives promoted by the collective entity to support environmental, social or ethical contents in production by small entrepreneurs, where such factors should be important in final markets, maybe even including protocols intended to obtain the

district brand at local level. They are therefore practices which respond to collective marketing policies of the district.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of the empirical evidence emerged from the research presented above seems to confirm the initial assumption: there exists a relation between the belonging to special organizational context like industrial districts and the carrying out of CSR practises.

Actually the results of the research confirmed that firms belonging to 16 districts in Lombardy are engaged in CSR activities, with varying levels of intensity, and they promote initiatives in several areas, depending on specific corporate needs and/or the greater or lesser sensitivity of management towards some areas of CSR rather than others. Generally, it was found that 97.5% of firms interviewed adopt at least one of the initiatives investigated: of these, 70.2% adopt from 1 to 10 of the initiatives under analysis, putting themselves at a level of commitment towards CSR classifiable as "low"; 26.8% adopt from 11 to 20 initiatives, which is classified as "medium" commitment towards CSR; the remaining 2.9% adopt from 21 to 30 initiatives which puts them at a "high" level of commitment towards CSR (the total number of initiatives investigated was 52).

More in particular, in their CSR policies, district firms pay particular attention to the stakeholders inside the district, and in fact the CSR areas which companies invest the most on, are employees, community and environment.

Regarding relations with employees, overall 72.5% of the sample adopted at least one of the initiatives investigated. Compared to analogous research, undertaken however in populations of firms not bound to territorial ambits as peculiar as districts, this is a significantly higher percentage.

Regarding relations with the community, overall 71.2% of the sample adopted at least one of the initiatives investigated. Here too, compared with analogous research undertaken in populations not bound to territorial ambits as peculiar as districts, this is a significantly higher percentage.

Finally, regarding the environment, overall 72.0% of this sample adopted at least one of the initiatives investigated.

Therefore – as was stated in the first hypothesis - the results of the research suggest that *belonging to this particular territorial context seems to favour socially responsible behaviours towards the stakeholders inside the district (employees, the local community) and towards the environment, certainly in virtue of the special relationship that binds them to the territory.*

And also the second hypothesis seems to be confirmed. In fact, *as was to be expected for SMEs, the firms investigated seem to prefer not to advertise their CSR practices.* The CSR of SMEs is a "hidden" CSR, of substance more than form. Finally, CSR initiatives do not seem to be so much justified by calculations of convenience, but rather the ethical and social values of entrepreneurs.

The third hypothesis suggested that CSR may represent a factor of differentiation for competitive strategy of firms in the district. This assumption is not demonstrated by the data. In fact, CSR appears to have more positive effect on competitive performance of large firms, but weak effect on SMEs. Anyway, largest firms usually are the leaders in the districts and play the role of coordinator of local firms networks. It is worth analysing more deeply, in future research, the role of large firms towards SMEs and the relationship between their strategies and CSR.

Finally, in spite of the statement of the fourth hypothesis, *the real role of the meta-management organizations of the district in the diffusion of CSR appears nowadays to be rather limited*. What they have done so far appears insufficient for firms, which, however, do expect help in this field, particularly from entrepreneurial associations and the Chamber of Commerce, but also from universities and research centres. According to the firms interviewed, the diffusion of CSR in the district should see entrepreneurial associations in the front line, with Chambers of Commerce backing them up. That which clearly emerges is the role, above all, of the private sector.

This last finding suggests the opportunity to develop further research in relationship between CSR practices and SMEs' strategy in firm networks and districts, for better understanding the dynamics of entrepreneurial choices at the "meso" level that lies between the traditional level of the behaviours of a single company, the "micro" level, and that of the customs and collective actions of the local productive system, the "macro" level.

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COLLANA WORKING PAPER

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1. Fabio Antoldi, *Industrial districts in Italy caught between local tradition and global competition*, Collana Working Paper del Centro di Ricerca per lo Sviluppo Imprenditoriale dell'Università Cattolica, n. 1/2007..
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