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Public and Corporate socio-territorial policies. CSR as strategy for a new and enlarged social sustainability

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Abstract. The paper emphasizes the growing importance of public-private partnerships in fostering socio-territorial sustainability. It highlights a shift away from the traditional view of businesses as "irresponsible" and driven by predatory motives, toward seeing them as active partners in public policy and governance. Corporate social responsibility is positioned as a key driver of this change, with a focus on engaging businesses in collaborative efforts with public institutions. The study reviews international literature and conducts empirical research involving 100 small and medium-sized enterprises in Bari, examining their corporate welfare practices and engagement with local communities. The findings underscore the importance of business-public sector collaboration in promoting sustainability, revealing both the potential and limitations of corporate social sustainability as not only a cultural paradigm but also a practical tool for business decision-making and territorial governance. This approach aligns with the quintuple helix model, which integrates various sectors in addressing societal challenges.

Keywords: private-public network, corporate social responsibility, socio-territorial sustainability, communities, territories, quality of life.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability has progressively become more complex, extending beyond the solely environmental dimension to include both economic and social aspects. This shift in perspective is leading to changes in socio-territorial design models based on specific procedural and systemic approaches. Within these, the role of policies that strengthen multifactorial and multilevel networks (Aslaksen et al., 2021; Conzelmann, 2008) capable of responding to changing needs while preserving the cultural models in which sustainability takes shape is central. Thus, we face not only different situations but also new ways of understanding these situations and the processes at play. This awareness prompts learning paths that can impact cultural and regulatory models, generating structural and systemic changes.

A central role must be recognized in the synergies between the public and private sectors, with the latter increasingly called to operate within

logics and models that exceed mere profit, following a Weberian rationality towards purpose, and tempering it with a broader responsibility oriented towards value – in Weberian terms – taking care of its internal and external stakeholders and viewing the territory as a common good and a new bearer of rights. These models guide businesses towards practices connected to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and *beyond the bottom-line* reporting, resulting from an indispensable growing focus on an extended concept of well-being and quality of life.

This extended and complex concept of well-being that guides corporate welfare practices is directed both at internal stakeholders and at the communities residing in the company's reference territories, considered essential interlocutors of the company itself and part of its design processes. In this changed scenario, the connection between institutions and private entities and synergistic actions that do not reduce corporate welfare to a mere substitute for public welfare or function to cover its deficiencies, but rather as an integral part of it, connected with local actors and stakeholders, is fundamental for a shared project aimen at community wellbeing. We are facing an extended model of *responsible welfare* (Cesareo, 2017; Cesareo & Pavesi, 2019) referring to the entire community in a logic of *care* and *self-care* for responsive communities (Carrera, 2022).

Within this substantial cultural shift in perspective, public institutions play a crucial role, called to recognize, support, and enhance these virtuous practices, and in some cases, to coordinate them, going beyond any logic of separation.

2. CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In this perspective, CSR should be understood as a fundamental tool that has guided companies in the logic of a sort of caring for their employees, their families, and even the communities residing in their reference territories.

The European and then the national reflection on "Corporate Social Responsibility", CSR as it is mentioned in international documents and guidelines, is part of this project of (re)construction of new forms of solidarity between corporates and local territories. It found its regulatory structure in the Green Book of the European Commission of 2001, which defines it as "voluntary integration by companies of social and environmental concerns into their commercial activities and their relations with stakeholders" (point 20). The aim is guaranteeing a "more competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable

economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (point 6). CSR is the only relatively recent result of the awareness of how much it is possible to achieve social objectives also in the market, allowing companies to carry out their production activities in accordance with their own ethical guidelines (Carrera, 2005). It can be interpreted as a response and reaction to a widespread shift towards neoliberal positions, turned out to be increasingly central (Freeman et al., 2006). According with what is stated on the website of the Ministry of Labour "by renewing the efforts to promote CSR, the European Commission intends to create favourable conditions for sustainable growth, ethically responsible behaviour of companies, and the creation of lasting employment in the medium and long term, also through a new corporate governance, which must look at the human and social capital of local communities as a form of sustainable investment". An expanding body of literature has highlighted the long-term evolution of this concept (Carroll, 2021; Idowu et al., 2017; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Matten & Moon, 2020; Windsor, 2021). This evolution is the result of cultural shifts in scientific, public, and media discussions (Paul & Parra, 2021; Askalen et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the extensive discourse on CSR has itself been a driving force behind this change.

CSR emerged in the post-World War II era, driven by a growing awareness of civil rights for various groups of citizens and future generations at social and environmental levels. Starting from the 1960s, the theme gained increasing attention among entrepreneurs, regulatory bodies, and political and academic circles. Initially, CSR was driven by the individual sensitivity and philanthropic efforts of entrepreneurs. However, it has evolved into a broader, more structured concept with global significance. Today, the institutionalization of CSR is evident through the creation of specific roles such as CR Officer, CSR Officer, Director of Sustainability, Director of Philanthropy, and Compliance and Ethics Officers (Carroll, 2015; 2021). CSR has moved beyond the dichotomy of altruism and strategic rationalization. The key point now is the recognition of CSR as an example of the inextricable link between companies and societies, envisioned as connected by a virtuous economic and social bond.

The term "Corporate Citizenship", although similar in meaning to CSR, this term serves as a useful metaphor, emphasizing that companies, like citizens, have responsibilities and duties (Carroll, 2015; Paul & Parra, 2021). This semantic shift from the "Business and Society" model to the "Business in Society" model underscores the evolving perception of the role of businesses within the broader social context. Discourses are always rooted in specific socio-political and cultural contexts,

and the main topics of CSR have evolved over time (Mark-Ungericht & Weiskopf, 2007) as a result of ongoing debates involving different and sometimes competing meanings and narratives (Brown et al., 2016). This new representation of the relationship between companies and communities is based on a broader assumption of responsibility that aims to counteract or, at the very least, mitigate behaviors and decisions driven solely by profit. The necessity for cultural and regulatory interventions that mitigate the most harmful effects of the traditional business model, stems from the awareness, as discussed by Luciano Gallino (2005), that irresponsible enterprises are not a deviation from the model but rather a direct result of managerial capitalism. Within this model, companies tend to operate irresponsibly due to economic intrinsic and structural patterns. Unethical behaviors that directly impact employees, who are the company's first stakeholders and "internal customers," include choices related to human resources: "The company employs as few people as possible and tends to lay off employees to create value; it aims to retain and acquire loyalty from only a small core of staff; it employs a high percentage of precarious or temporary workers; it prefers to use available resources for financial operations rather than new investments" (Gallino, 2005, p. 124).

The model of *irresponsible corporate*, to continue using Gallino's words, concretely shapes the condition that Ulrich Beck (1992) described as the "society of the consequences of secondary consequences," where individuals bear the effects of decisions made elsewhere over which they have no control. This model breaks the social bond, creating a profound dichotomy and transforming society for some subjects into a Luhmanian "danger society" and for others into a "risk society," distinguished precisely by the possibility of making decisions or, instead, having to merely endure them (Luhmann, 1996).

This risky process underscores the necessity for creating binding pathways for enterprises to fully assume responsibility in order to achieve sustainability goals, considered in the wider sense, even moving beyond the theoretical validity of voluntary action. Although the concept has recently been criticized as an "empty signifier" – implying that while it seems to address fundamental concerns, it lacks specific meaning and can be interpreted in various ways (Brown, 2016) – it still maintains theoretical and practical significance. Similarly, despite the empirical uncertainty regarding actual convergence among the numerous codes, standards, and frameworks designed to guide sustainable organizations, many argue that the reporting of sustainability performance indicators (De Cambourg, 2019; GRI & USB, 2020; IFRS

Foundation, 2020; KPMG, 2017) is approaching a critical threshold (Coulmont et al., 2022).

"Companies should consider an innovative and more responsible triple bottom line of reporting and of the planning itself. It should be capable of incorporating the concept of sustainable development in the evaluation of performances, starting from the identification of more complex indicators of an economic (ability to produce income, profits and employment), social (ability to guarantee conditions of well-being and fair and supportive growth, in compliance with human and labor rights) and environmental nature (ability to guarantee reproducibility and quality of natural resources) (Perrini, 2006; 2007; Perrini & Tencati, 2008)" (Carrera, 2022, pag. 5). In the CSR perspective, companies reconceptualize themselves beyond purely economic terms and reconsider their stakeholders accordingly: "Corporate social responsibility extends beyond the doors of the company into the local community and involves a wide range of stakeholders in addition to employees and shareholders: business partners and suppliers, customers, public authorities and NGOs representing local communities, as well as the environment" (Green Paper 2001 pag. 42). In this view, the concept of stakeholder includes not only the entire local community but also the broader civil society.

Corporates are thus orienting themselves towards stakeholders in an increasingly broad sense, in line with the evolving concept of stakeholders. The stakeholder theory, indeed, originates from a deliberate wordplay to highlight the comparison and distinction from the previous stockholder theory. The latter, associated with Friedman in the 1960s, asserted that a company's sole purpose is to generate profit, provided it operates within fair competition and legal boundaries. Conversely, the stakeholder theory introduces an ethical dimension into the previously purely economic framework, acknowledging the company's responsibility towards "*All individuals with whom it has a relationship and who, in various ways, affect the business.*" (Giaretta, 2000; pag. 44). In this new perspective, management has a fiduciary responsibility not only to shareholders but also to other entities and individuals, extending the company's responsibility beyond mere financial metrics, or "beyond the last line of the balance sheet." The shift from stockholder theory to the more post-Fordist stakeholder theory marks a significant change in the company's strategic logic regarding responsibility, time horizons, and the types of benefits and costs involved. As Pelanda and Savona (2005) note, this involves planning and coordinating synergistic actions between companies and both current and potential stakeholders, including investors,

employees, suppliers, consumers, trade unions, associations, environmentalists, the third sector, local communities, and, with an increasing weight, public institutions. The goal is to build and maintain essential alliances between entities and individuals who often have seemingly divergent interests.

CSR could be considered a dynamic process of "progressive acquisition of reference horizons", representing a transition from initial social irresponsibility to the assumption of responsibility, not just economically, but also for any negative externalities resulting from specific business actions. The change from the old to the new CSR model is central to this shift (Auld et al., 2008, pag. 415). « In the older one, efforts are largely focused on corporate philanthropic activities that usually had little to do with the firm's core business practices. Instead, the new CSR is squarely focused on internalizing firm negative externalities, and, in this perspective, the next generation of CSR has the potential to become an effective tool within domestic and global environmental and social governance» (Carrera, 2022).

With this transition, companies are compelled to engage in dialogue with the broader social and, moreover, institutional context. From this standpoint, the concept of CSR remains closely intertwined with the objective of fostering a high level of territorial cohesion (Davoudi, 2005; Faludi, 2009; 2013; Medeiros, 2019; Amin et al., 1992).

Over the past few years, there has been a notable resurgence of interest in understanding the role of CSR in addressing environmental and social issues (Auld et al., 2008) and in stimulating the action of public administration. To achieve this objective, the adoption of ethical codes should evolve towards a firm commitment to engage in socially responsible behaviors, starting at the local community level. CSR is presented as a virtuous integration of top-down national and supranational regulatory guidelines with bottom-up needs and initiatives drawn from national and international best practices (such as transparent financial reporting, procedures for supplier identification, a focus on human resources development, and social and environmental reporting).

CSR is portrayed as a complex and ambitious endeavor, the success of which is both challenging and desirable. A critical but essential step in this process is transitioning from the regulatory and planning phase to the implementation phase, where this multifaceted concept is translated into actionable practices. Concerning the implementation phase, companies themselves highlight several challenges, including a lack of tools, expertise, and financial resources for such projects. These challenges represent more of a cultural obstacle than an economic one, particularly for multinational corporations, given their characteristics that make them less tied to specific territories compared to medium and small-sized enterprises. It would be beneficial to provide widespread and standardized tools for environmental management that could serve as stringent reference criteria for various types of companies while accommodating their specific characteristics.

CSR has the potential to transform market behavior and serve as a significant force for social and environmental change. Simultaneously, it may also offer economic advantages for enterprises themselves. As Luis Moreno pointed out regarding strategies for achieving work-life balance for women, "the case for reconciling work and family responsibilities illustrates how these 'meeting points' between welfare and CSR can advance citizenship and optimize business activities" (2010, pag. 691).

3. INVESTMENT IN THE TERRITORY AS NEW STAKEHOLDER: TERRITORIAL CORPORATE WELFARE

Beyond the progressively increasing importance given to attention towards internal stakeholders within companies, which can be traced back to the studies and reflections of the authors of the Human Relations School such as Elton Mayo in the 1950s, the true innovation lies in the sense of new possible territorial alliances and territorial corporate welfare. This label encompasses a series of services, actions, and innovative choices directed towards the territory and implemented by companies, often in synergy with local public institutions. A networking aiming for a higher level of well-being understood in a broad sense and perceived as a responsibility that must be shared.

Corporate welfare encompasses a broad range of beneficiaries, both internal and external, who are integral to the company's core activities. This is understood not merely as an exchange but as a response to the rights of workers and the community, framed within a holistic ecological perspective. Corporate territorial welfare aims to complement rather than replace public welfare, enhancing the overall system's ability to meet the well-being needs of communities. A corporate welfare plan can benefit both the company and its employees (Tessema, 2013). It can improve corporate environmental awareness, boost employee well-being and attractiveness to potential new hires, increase employee retention, enhance the company's employer branding reputation, and elevate its productivity and market reputation.

Effective communication of a company's welfare plan to both internal and external stakeholders is crucial (Free-

man et al., 2006). According to Granovetter's "embeddedness theory" (1993), economic behaviors and situations are deeply rooted in social and institutional relationships, considering them in isolation is a significant error. As a result, many economic and corporate actions transcend pure computational rationality, being instead embedded in systems of active social and personal relationships. These characteristics shape the specific configuration of economic relations systems (Moro, 1998).

After a period characterized by Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism and the marginalization of corporate welfare choices (Grandi, 2014), there has recently been a renewed focus on corporate welfare plans, especially among large companies with specific corporate cultures and resources to implement targeted interventions. Medium-sized and small-sized companies have also shown increasing interest in corporate welfare as a strategic tool to improve their relationships with the communities where they operate. For these smaller enterprises, corporate welfare can be challenging due to their limited number of employees – hence fewer potential beneficiaries – and their widespread geographical distribution.

But on the cultural level, in the last decades, something is changing. It is impossible to ignore these specific characteristics make it difficult to implement best practices, requiring significant effort to coordinate various offices, and there is often a distrust among small and medium-sized entrepreneurs about joining associations due to fear of losing control over the process. But some research's conducted in the Apulian industrial region suggests, the solution for small and medium-sized enterprises may lie in creating inter-company welfare plans involving public actors, businesses, and trade unions to achieve economies of scale otherwise unattainable due to their small size. Work-life balance is a crucial aspect of corporate welfare, providing essential conditions for strategies that reconcile private and work needs, often in collaboration with the cooperative sector to ensure a high quality of working life (Pavolini, 2016).

In this context, the significance of corporate territorial welfare is emphasized, serving as the most innovative expression of CSR, as a strategic tool to combat also social and geographical marginalization (Faludi, 2010; Luukonen, 2010), ensuring polycentric and socially sustainable development of territories and enhancing the quality of life for local communities. Politically, this reflects the principle of territorial democracy, which aims to provide quality spaces with services and opportunities regardless of location (Carrera, 2020). This principle is especially vital for urban, suburban, and peri-urban areas characterized by significant disparities (Colleoni, 2013; 2019). The goal is to overcome the division of territories into privileged, well-serviced areas – typically city centers – and under-serviced areas – usually the suburbs – forcing residents to travel for services or, if unable, to avoid to give them up.

Mauro Magatti observes how much «even today, the social polarizations between the center and the periphery remain conspicuous, and for some even strengthened by the dynamics associated with the knowledge economy. Beyond the irenic narratives about the "creative city", the development of the advanced tertiary sector tends, in fact, to accentuate the differences between the globalized knowledge workers and the poor workers of the peripheries, as first highlighted by Saskia Sassen [and Leonie Sandercook (2003)] in his studies of global cities» (2020, p. 87).

The spatial and symbolic divide between affluent areas and deprived ones has particularly concrete and detrimental effects on the most socially vulnerable individuals. For these groups, this divide can feel like a deep social wound. Addressing this, a fundamental shift in the understanding of CSR is crucial. By focusing on requalifying and valorizing territories, this new perspective on CSR can significantly enhance the quality of life for citizens and counteract territorial *peripherality* (Carrera, 2021).

The next generation of CSR has the potential to become a powerful tool in both domestic and global environmental and social governance (Auld, Bernstein, Cashore, 2008). Unlike earlier efforts that focused on corporate philanthropy disconnected from core business practices, modern CSR aims to internalize a firm's negative externalities and integrate responsibility into the company's core activities, while still contributing to the community. The goal of territorial cohesion is linked to strengthening the social capital of the region, encompassing elements of civil society such as culture, prevailing attitudes, consensus, trust, and shared values. These factors increasingly constitute a competitive advantage for certain regions and the companies within them (Moro, 1998), especially by valuing public-private partnerships, both in terms of immediate impacts and long-term transformations through stakeholder learning (Auld, Bernstein, Cashore, 2008).

4. CORPORATE SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL WELFARE. A MIXED-METHODS RESEARCH IN THE METROPOLITAN AREA OF BARI

4.1. Research plan

On the theme of CSR and companies' choices to implement actions of corporate and territorial welfare directed at internal and external stakeholders, a mixed-

methods research was conducted from March to October 2023, carried out in collaboration by University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Confimi Industria, Intrapresa Centro Studi, Libera Università del Mediterraneo "Giuseppe Degennaro". The research was initiated with a series of interviews with entrepreneurs and employer representatives, as well as some focus groups involving entrepreneurs, executives, and experts in corporate welfare. Within the framework of these meetings, actions already implemented were analyzed, but above all, critical issues, deficiencies, and future projects were discussed. Based on the analysis of these data, a structured questionnaire was developed and administered to one hundred companies in the Bari metropolitan area affiliated with Confimi, aimed at verifying the types of services offered by companies to their employees and the local community, as well as those in the planning phase.

4.2. Analysis of results

Some of the variables investigated and assumed to be independent, such as the company's sector, its longevity in the market, and even the presence of a dedicated human resources manager within the company, emerged as poorly discriminatory. Instead, the awareness and orientation of individual entrepreneurs on these issues appeared to be significant, which is understandable given the sample of medium and small-sized businesses that were referred to.

Regarding the specific services provided to employees, a profound differentiation emerged, particularly focused on time management and reconciliation actions, but also extending to other areas such as recreational activities.

Regarding the unfortunate recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, some entrepreneurs stated that they had established, in agreement with public institutions, particularly with the Health Department of the Puglia Region, a vaccination hub dedicated to employees but also open to the community, thus confirming the model of the community holder.

For the purposes of this analysis, the services and activities directed at employees (Fig. 1) are of particular interest, as well as those related to the territory (Fig. 2), considering, along with the communities residing there, as external stakeholders according to the "community holder" model.

As observed, it is the reference to the territory that represents the true space of innovation, involving in a more pronounced and innovative way the relationship with public institutions, both as administrations and as research centers and universities.
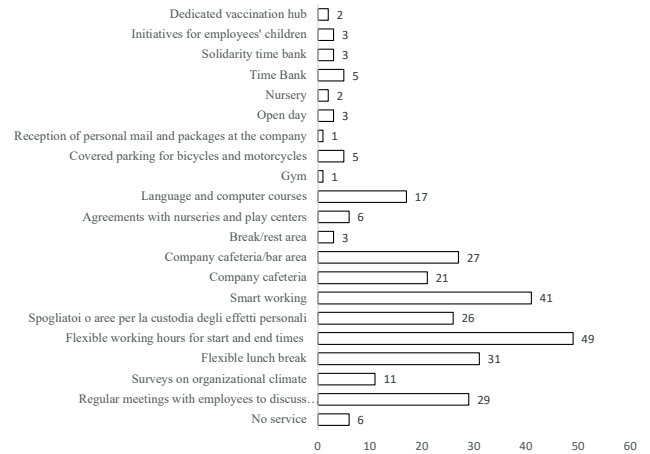

Figure 1. Frequency of company services/activities referred to employers.
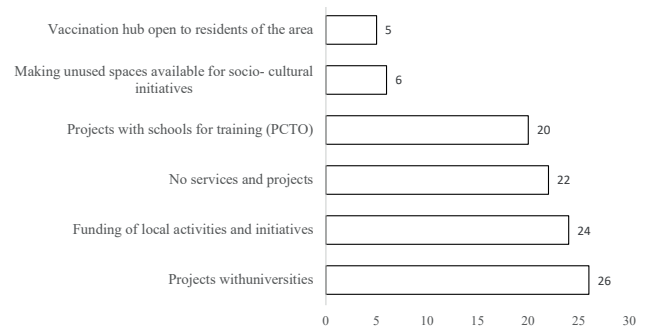

Figure 2. Services and activities aimed at the community/territory.

It is evident that the services designed for the territory result from a public-private collaboration that, in this case, companies have stated to have initiated, but for which they lament the lack of closer and more continuous collaboration. It is also this deficiency, along with a still relatively limited culture of CSR, that the entrepreneurs involved in the study attribute to the low number of services and opportunities directed towards the territories. The very low numbers of services developed and offered to the territory are not even compensated by the prospect of future planning, which shows absolutely negligible numbers (Fig. 3). It also emerges that companies aiming to implement additional services are those that already have a significant current provision.

By analyzing the qualitative data obtained from meetings with some entrepreneurs from the same territory and the qualitative insights derived from certain open-ended questions in the questionnaire, as well as from individually conducted interviews, it was possible to cross-reference two foundational dimensions. These
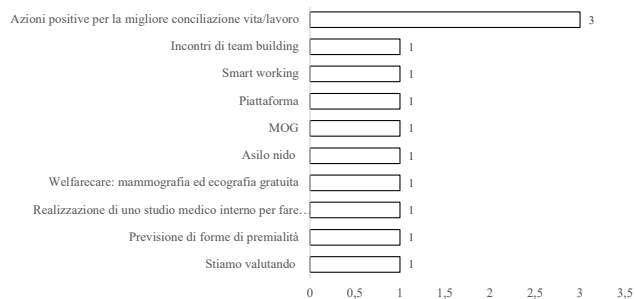
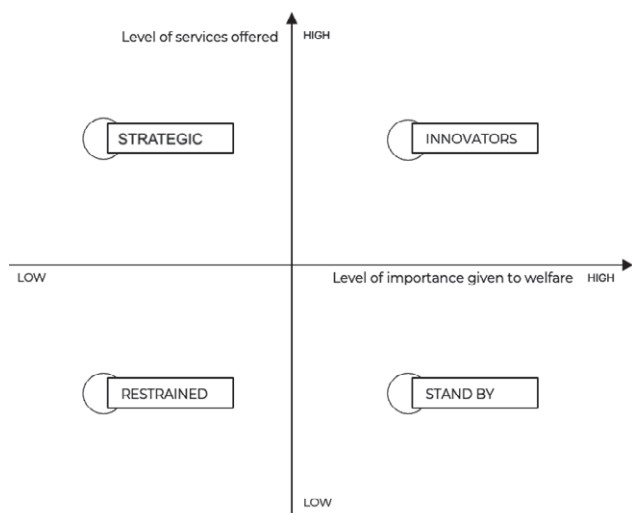Figure 3. Activities and project in the planning phase.

Azioni positive per la migliore conciliazione vita/lavoro	3
Incontri di team building	1
Smart working	1
Piattaforma	1
MOG	1
Asilo nido	1
Welfarecare: mammografia ed ecografia gratuita	1
Realizzazione di uno studio medico interno per fare…	1
Previsione di forme di premialità	1
Stiamo valutando	1

Figure 3. Activities and project in the planning phase.

Figure 4. The four categories of entrepreneurs.

dimensions enabled the construction of a typology with four categories of entrepreneurs (Fig. 4).

The *innovative entrepreneurs* are those who heavily invest in corporate welfare and declare a strong sense of responsibility towards their employees, as well as towards their families and the local communities. It is to this type that those who wish for a higher level of communication with public institutions and greater involvement in decision-making processes can be attributed.

On the other hand, the *strategic entrepreneurs*, while offering at least a moderate number of services, do not declare a particular focus on welfare, considering it more as a necessary choice to ensure the well-being of their employees, and they concentrate their offerings primarily on them.

The *restrained entrepreneurs* are those whose companies have a low or non-existent number of services directed towards internal stakeholders and virtually none for external ones. They also declare to have nothing in the planning phase, thus showing the structural nature of the described condition.

The *stand-by entrepreneurs*, while offering a low level of services, recognize the fundamental function of corporate welfare and public-private relationships for a more effective offering for the well-being and growth of the territory. It is to them, in particular, that the research has turned to in defining a sort of catalog of best practices, which is continuously expandable, to enhance existing best practices and build projects and mixed partnerships.

Entrepreneurs belonging to both the first and fourth types described have highlighted that among the interventions functional to enhancing the quality of the territory in terms of innovation and well-being, the following should be considered: a) Encouraging structured meetings and networks for dialogue among entrepreneurs, also for the sharing and/or joint design of best practices. b) Facilitating internal communication within the company for the periodic identification of employees' needs and "desires"; network proposals and interconnections. c) Opening the company to territorial networks with schools, associations, and universities. d) Promoting and supporting the implementation of targeted scientific research that guides choices and investments in corporate welfare. e) Promoting greater interconnection with territorial institutions for the implementation of integrated welfare plans. f) Finding forms of public co-financing of activities or tax breaks that reward "virtuous" companies.

5. CONCLUSIVE NOTES

Within the context of questioning the model of the irresponsible enterprise (Gallino, 2005), driven by a predatory intent towards its own territory, it can become possible moving towards more complex visions. Every regulatory and social mechanism aimed at fostering responsible enterprises thus becomes a crucial bridge towards a model of territorial cohesion that encompasses both social and spatial protection. As Simin Davoudi (2005) observed, focusing on territorial cohesion can potentially reshape European spatial policy by integrating aspects of spatial and social justice.

The diffusion and penetration of the principles of CSR into corporate culture represent a central element in generating a new model of territorial governance. Extending the system of services not only to internal stakeholders, a more classical approach already present in the Human Relations analysis, but also to the communities present in the company's reference territories, is the true element of innovation capable of constituting a *double-loop learning* process for the organizations themselves

(Argyris & Schön). These organizations demonstrate that they recognize themselves as fundamental actors in the territory and, as mentioned, in its governance strategies.

At the same time, this change represents a shift in perspective for public institutions themselves, whose contribution is essential for the provision of territorial services. Driven by this changed model of cultural and organizational orientation within enterprises, these institutions are also modifying, enhancing, and accelerating the transformation of the territorial multilevel governance model, emphasizing its multi-actor nature. Thus, a causal circularity can be created between the private and public sectors, within which communities can find conditions for increased protagonism.

This different and innovative quality of territorial networks can come to be configured as one of the «local collective competitive goods» (Trigilia et al., 2004), capable of representing, at the same time, both a factor of attractiveness for new investments and productive settlements, and a central element within a strategy able to guarantee higher levels of quality of life and well-being for individuals and communities.

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