Social Responsibility of Small Business in Regional Australia

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ABSTRACT

The recognition that CSR is important for business sustainability has focused the bulk of the research on explicit normative arguments for its adoption by large corporations. This ignores the role of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) and the investigation of how (if at all) such firms actually perform CSR activities. This exploratory study investigates eight SMEs in the regional Australian city of Ballarat in terms of their dimensions, activities and barriers to CSR. The results show a very large gap between academic normative CSR proposals and the actual operation of CSR processes in this small cohort of SMEs in a regional community. What is exposed is the complexity of CSR ‘on the ground at the business frontline’.

KEY WORDS: corporate social responsibility, small and medium sized enterprises, regional enterprises, Australia

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has moved from ideology to business reality as the spillover impacts of business decisions on the social and physical environment - both negative and positive - increasingly become apparent to the wider community. This study aims to examine this reality from the particular perspective of a small regional community (Ballarat, Australia) and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) that consider themselves as integrated into the values and attitudes of that community. This is an exploratory investigation into the dimensions, activities and barriers of CSR within the decision-making of these specific SMEs. Given the large research agenda on the strong business case for CSR and the lack of investigation of what SMEs actually do about CSR within their communities, this study provides a starting point towards a pragmatic CSR research agenda on SMEs and regional communities.

BACKGROUND

Despite the continuing debates over what role the businesses should perform in society (Bowen 1953; Friedman 1970), the view that businesses take a broader responsibility than economic alone and thus integrate CSR in business has received wide support for a number of reasons. Firstly, CSR is
considered as an important contributor of sustainable business development. For example, The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) defines corporate social responsibility as “the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life” (WBCSD, 2002). Secondly, it is seen as a necessary attribute of a modern business enterprise; for example, Knox, Maklan and French (2005:8) view that “Corporate Social Responsibility is something that every board must now address in some form.” Finally, many authors assert that both large, as well as small businesses should integrate CSR for no other reason than for improved economic performance. Smith and Langford (2009) review the CSR literature and indicate that businesses benefit by being socially responsible from the viewpoint of risk reduction, financial investing and commercial benefit.

Whilst CSR is important for any business, regardless of size and sector (Hopkins, 2003), the bulk of literature in CSR has been limited to larger firms (Perrini, Russo & Tencati, 2007; Spence, Schmidpeter & Habisch, 2003). Blombäck and Wigren (2009) criticize researchers for their heavy inclination to follow the media which has published numerous stories based on its knowledge of large, listed and widely recognized companies. It is argued that the CSR movement would advance if SMEs actively participate in it. The rationale behind this argument is that SMEs make up the majority of businesses worldwide and account for 50 to 60 percent of employment (GRI, 2008; UNIDO, 2002). Although individually SMEs may not have significant impact on society and environment, however, because of the enormous presence of SMEs in most economies, their aggregate achievements could be considerable (Jenkins, 2006; Spence et al., 2003). Further, SMEs are better positioned and equipped to design appropriate CSR strategies to address the needs of the local communities and environment as they operate in local communities, have closer links to them, and are more aware of local environmental risks and emerging social issues, than their larger counterparts (European Commission, 2003; Sweeney, 2007; UNIDO, 2002). Thus, as the nature of doing
businesses in SMEs is largely personal, business reputation and embeddedness of the firm within its stakeholder community play a key role in shaping their socially responsible behaviour. In this context, SMEs generally operate in a socially responsible way with stakeholders including wider local community (Fuller and Tian, 2006). Moreover, SMEs are considered more capable than their counterparts to respond to social and community needs due to their flexible organization and simple ownership structure (Sarbutts, 2003; Sweeney, 2007). Despite this normative support, empirical CSR research in SMEs has been very limited and it has only recently attracted interest from academics (Blombäck and Wigren 2009; Fassin 2008; Perrini et al., 2007).

Unlike the rest of the Western world, academic CSR research has been inadequate in regards to the Asia-Pacific region (Baughn, Bodie & McIntosh, 2007) and Australia in particular (Jones, Marshall & Mitchell, 2007; Harley and Warburton, 2008; Warburton, Shapiro, Buckley & Gellecum, 2004). The focus of existing Asia-Pacific based literature has also been on CSR in large businesses, although CSR practice by SMEs in regional (non-major metropolitan) areas is almost non-existent although from the previous argument, such enterprises in smaller communities are better positioned to contribute to local community building and social wellbeing. This paper makes an attempt to fill this knowledge gap. In particular, it aims to explore in one small city, the meaning of CSR to regional SMEs, their practices, motivations and barriers to implement.

**INTRODUCTION TO BALLARAT**

Ballarat is Victoria’s largest inland city. It is indeed one of the largest Australian inland cities with an estimated population of 94,088. Elevated at 450 meters above sea level, Ballarat is situated approximately 110km north-west of Melbourne, the capital city of state of Victoria (City of Ballarat, 2010). In the 1900’s Ballarat became famous when Gold was discovered in the area. Within a year of the Gold’s discovery 20,000 inhabitants invaded the region searching for gold. Due to the population
explosion, a rail line came through in 1862, which opened up many stores, markets, and trades giving life and sustainability to the city (Ballarat.com, 2010).

In recent years, Ballarat has experienced a severe decrease in average rainfall. This is evidenced by the town’s famous lake, Lake Wendouree, drying up and the implementation of stage 4 water restrictions on the city and many of the surrounding areas (VWIAI, 2005). The City of Ballarat, The Central Highlands Water Commission, and State Government of Victoria have initiated a number of projects that are designed to ensure that the city is guaranteed a steady water supply and to regenerate the lake. As a daily routine, the residents have become very proactive and redirect grey-water from homes directly onto gardens and for outdoor cleaning.¹

**METHODOLOGY**

The methodology chosen for this study reflects two issues. One is the nature of the owner/managers who participated in the study, while the other is the nature of the CSR process under investigation. The firms asked to participate operated an SME within Ballarat City in 2009. They came to be contacted due to some member of these firms having attended an advertised session on ‘how to make your firm more green’, called *Smartgreen.*² The session was held at the University of Ballarat under the auspices of the Centre for Regional Innovation and Competitiveness (CRIC) in mid-2008. Attending this session clearly identified that decision-makers in these firms recognized the value of

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² *SmartGreen* is an initiative of the Centre for Regional Innovation and Competitiveness (CRIC), University of Ballarat and the Ballarat City Council to assist small businesses in the Ballarat region to be more entrepreneurial and access new business opportunities from sustainable environmental policies and the development and delivery of environmental services. For more details see [www.MySmartGreen.com](http://www.MySmartGreen.com)
being environmentally conscious at least at a personal level. On a broader base, it indicated that these
owner/managers had a sense of community both towards the environment and the learning
community based around the university.

The nature of the CSR process being investigated was not some perfunctory CSR reporting
process as discussed by Fassin (2008). Instead, this study aims to appreciate the types of CSR
activities actually being engaged by these firms. This is being investigated through decision-makers
in SMEs who have indicated, through their attendance at the Smartgreen session, a commitment by
their business to social responsible activities within the community of Ballarat. Eight of these
businesses agreed to participate in one in-depth interview each on the nature of their firms’ CSR
commitments and how such commitments were reflected in their normal business activities.

The population sample of cases in this qualitative study refers to a ‘selection’, not as
‘representative’ of anything, but as a purposive selection. This is deemed an important qualitative
sampling method because the researchers decide which members of the population are most likely to
provide the answers to the research questions and then deliberately include them in the sample. This
involves choosing cases from which the researchers can substantially learn about the experience
(Polkinghorne, 2005), in this study it is the CSR experience. Shaw (1999:63) argues that purposive
sampling “…demands that if the researcher is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the
research problem, the number of cases involved must be significantly less than when using
probabilistic sampling.”

Specifically, CSR decisions by owner/managers at the core of this inquiry are a function of a
socially constructed process that aims to deliver commercial outcomes that are congruent with the
highest social and ethical values aspired to by the community in which the SMEs are operating. What
this study is aiming to understand is the actual pragmatic decisions that SMEs owner/managers make
that are congruent with the social and ethical values of the community that they are engaged with every day.

The semi-structured interview method was constructed to take account of particular CSR experiences of these specific firms and to facilitate the investigation of their experiences. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to examine each firm’s CSR experiences in terms of areas of focus, why engage, how long, how managed, barriers to engagement and support required. See Appendix A for the full questionnaire.

Data Collection

The data was collected by interviewing owner/managers of eight regional enterprises operating in Ballarat. The businesses interviewed are set out in Table 1. The questionnaire was completed in the presence of the interviewee. The conversation however, continued after the questionnaire was completed to elaborate on some of the earlier responses to the interviews. All this information was recorded contemporaneously so that it could be included in the content analysis. Each transcript including the responses of the interviews were then put into a web-based word cloud program known as Wordle\(^1\) to discern the most common words in the conversation. The clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source document. See Appendix B for a representation of the Wordle cloud for this study. This was then reviewed against the source document to confirm the findings. Primary data as quoted statements by the interviewees that are refereed to in the remainder of this paper are identified by italics with double quotation marks.

\(^1\) Based on material accessed 10 August 2009 from: [http://www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net)
Characteristics of SMEs Studied

All of the firms interviewed were independent SMEs with their roots in Ballarat where they all started their businesses. Three of the eight firms had offices in other regional areas in Victoria but their head office was in Ballarat. In all instances except one, the owner/s of the firm was interviewed. In the one exception, the General Manager was interviewed. The firms ranged in size from nine employees to 114 employees. The shortest period any of the firms had been in business was five years whilst the longest was 82 years. Whilst three of the owner/managers had been in this current business for less than 20 years, all except one had been in their own business more than 20 years. The characteristics of the SMEs interviewed are presented in Table 1.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Meaning and Dimensions of CSR

All of the SMEs owner/managers interviewed were able to provide an elaboration of the term ‘CSR’ in their own context and identified the three important dimensions of CSR; that being business, community and environment. The analysis of CSR nodes in order of importance indicates that these SMEs considered ‘business’ twice as important as ‘community’, and ‘community’ was one-third more important than ‘environment’. Table 2 presents the dimensions of CSR and the meaning provided by the interviewed SMEs. The three dimensions of CSR emerging from the interviews are discussed below.

Business Dimension of CSR

While elaborating the business dimension of CSR, to varying degrees, six of the respondents referred
to “good business practice” as the most important element. By good business practice, the respondents generally meant offering good customer-centric services as well as looking after employees’ interest. While explaining good business practice as it relates to offering good customer services, the respondents generally meant “giving customers what they want” or in another respondent’s words, “ensuring 100 per cent customer satisfaction”. Although there was a concern among the respondents on how to achieve this goal at a wider scale, many of the respondents highlighted the importance of good customer services as the critical element of CSR in SMEs. One of the respondents mentioned “…whilst you cannot please everybody you should at least try”.

In elaborating good business practice as it relates to employees’ interest, the respondents viewed that CSR-focused businesses should also be responsible for employee welfare by providing “continued employment” and through “…paying employees fairly and regularly, providing a good physical working environment, taking care of employees, supporting creative work of employees children and providing support to work/life balance principles”. The employee aspect was particularly considered as an important issue in Ballarat at the time when the interviews were conducted as a significant number of employees had lost their jobs because several of Ballarat’s largest employers had either closed or retrenched over 800 members of their workforce. Given the background of the 2008-09 Global Financial Crisis\(^1\), it is not therefore surprising that the owner/managers interviewed regarded this aspect as the most important.

All of the respondents agreed that in the context of the business environment, SMEs must ensure good business practice in their business operations. One owner/manager expressed this view succinctly by stating: “All the aspects of good business practice should be embedded in day to day operations of the business”.

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\(^1\) Global Financial Crisis is the common term for the global recession that occurred between 2007 and 2009.
Community Dimension of CSR

For most of the SMEs, being socially responsible also meant being involved in the communities. In the language of respondents this means “…business’s impact on the community and community involvement and support”. All respondents considered that the issue of how they managed the operation of their business to produce an overall positive impact on community was a crucial dimension of CSR. For example, one relatively large SME viewed “CSR as community support”, while another respondent puts it in the following language:

“CSR is concerned for the welfare of members in the society. We are concerned with impact the business has on the broader community and being aware of what the business can do to affect the quality of life for the community….Providing a range of services and facilities that helps their wellbeing”.

A number of respondents agreed that being involved with the community provides competitive advantage and assists in the long term survival of the business. This was reflected in one of the owner/manager’s responses: “It’s difficult for my major competitors to break into this market when we are so much part of the community”. They also viewed that SMEs enjoy the advantageous position over larger businesses in their ability to engage in community work. In the words of an owner/manager: “We are embedded in the community because I can walk into a restaurant like this and know the person I am talking to. Our potential competitors who are based in big cities could no do that”. These responses recognize what Lindgreen and Swaen (2010:3) note, that CSR programs offer a ‘win-win’ scenario for the organizations and the community in which they operate.

Environmental Dimension of CSR

Being environmentally responsible did not register as important as one might
assume, given that ‘Smartgreen’ was the initial contact point, and especially with Ballarat’s environmental concerns with water shortage, increasing energy costs, and general climate change awareness. As evidence, Appendix B Wordle Cloud depicts no specific ecological-oriented words. Whilst all the interviewees acknowledged this dimension as an issue, they did so with varying degrees of importance, with only three indicating protection of the physical environment as a key dimension to CSR.

Whilst three interviewees considered the ecosystem important, only two of the eight interviewed, both manufacturers, considered it to be ‘the most’ important aspect of their social responsibility. One of the two manufacturers had received many accolades to do with innovations regarding water and energy usage. This owner/manager viewed that “…being environmentally responsible is the future of business and that those who ignored it did so at their own peril”. The other manufacturer said that this was a critical area

“…but it was difficult to determine how best to approach this problem given there was little information and support from his suppliers and the industry in general, particularly at the moment when most firms were just striving to survive. Therefore, there was little information on how to become sustainable, because customers didn’t seem to want it and it wasn’t their main concern”.

The third owner/manager who said that it was important questioned the cost/value of adopting environmentally sustainable strategies, arguing “…the value of this approach is very difficult to measure, I’m not sure it’s worth doing at this time given the cost/value”. As one of the other interviewees said in regard to this environmental dimension, “…this is not something our customers ask for and our industry doesn’t focus on”.
CSR Activities

All the firms regardless, of sector, believed that they engage in CSR by creating employment for local people as well as supporting community organizations. From time to time, all eight SMEs have been involved in supporting community organizations such as clubs, associations and civic organizations. Engaging CSR via environmental activities was much less evident.

The most common type of CSR activity relates to community development and appears in the form of ad hoc philanthropic donation of money, time and in-kind support. In addition, all but one (the youngest) of the SMEs had contributed by working as partners for community organizations through provision of their time and technical expertise free of cost. For example, one SME owner/manager in the hospitality industry participated voluntarily in the tourism board to contribute to the development of hospitality and tourism policy. Another SME nominated an engineer to various water steering committees in Ballarat where water crisis is the major environmental concern for the development of the region. This SME believes that “…it is good for the community and it is in our interest to help the community’s sustainability”.

Evidence from the interviews indicates that half of the SMEs carefully targeted their CSR activities. They mostly chose opportunities as were presented to them by different stakeholders. One SME supported its employee’s child who was an elite swimmer. Another SME contributed to the support of policy formulation by water authorities, as supply of water is considered critical for its success. Yet another SME in the hospitality industry supported only community groups which bought its services, and a SME retailer was the chair of the local regional business development committee. One owner/manager said community support was based on providing the “…biggest bang for my buck”. This comment was echoed by all interviewees. Only one did not provide money, but instead provided in-kind support to groups or organizations that were perceived as having a need. Notably,
Ballarat has amongst the highest rates of cancer for a regional Australian city, it therefore has a large cancer research unit; all but one of the firms interviewed provided financial support to this unit.

Examples by the interviewees of environmental CSR activities were limited. One SME used carbon neutral papers in its printing, while the award winning SME manufacturer mentioned above invested a considerable amount of money collecting and recycling rainwater for its own high water usage and another firm designed their new manufacturing plant to make the most of solar radiation thereby reducing their power usage. Of the firms interviewed, the resource intensive ones seemed more likely to take on ecologically responsible activities, whilst the others for whom the benefits did not appear clearly identifiable were less likely to become involved in such activities.

Overall, the view that customers are the key driver for CSR engagement was found common among all the SMEs owner/managers interviewed. In the words of one owner/manager “…customers expect businesses to be socially responsible”, or “…to do the right thing”. However, there was evidence that engagement in CSR was not always driven by business interest only or by pressure from external forces including customers. Sometimes it was internally driven by the owners’ consciousness for community and/or environmental wellbeing. This was reflected in the words of one owner/manager “…this community has supported this firm so it’s up to me to ensure that I have a positive impact on the community”. In the end, CSR motivation is complex, because such altruistic motives in a small regional community can also overlap with business interest as expressed succinctly by another owner/manager: “We do this because we care about the community, the employees and the environment. It’s also important to our business because this helps us remain competitive by reducing our costs”.

The CSR approaches of the SMEs interviewed were at various stages of development. Half of the firms had a CSR policy embedded in their organizations strategy even though this did not mean
that they only undertook initiatives that were incorporated into this strategy. All of them had contributed to fund-raising events, promotions and sponsorships, but in almost all cases, such community initiatives were carried out on an ad hoc basis. The contributions were made through networks, or when they had the time and money to contribute to a good cause. In only one case out of the eight SMEs studied was there a strategic approach to environmental responsibility through environmental management systems.

The findings on CSR engagement in the Ballarat regional SMEs reveal that they are congruent with findings of other SME studies on CSR activities in non-regional contexts (Jenkins 2006; Sweeney 2006). The exception in this study was the relatively low engagement with environmental CSR. Using the stakeholder engagement theory of CSR (Maak 2007), this study of regional SMEs recognizes that the major community and environment stakeholders in CSR initiatives play vastly varied roles with distinctive barriers clearly arising in the process.

Barriers

The key CSR barriers identified by all eight SMEs were time, money and resources. Without exception all the owner/managers testified that time and costs were the main reasons that they would not, or could not, engage in more socially responsible practices. One of the larger SMEs quoted that: “We’d like to do more but for us we still have to make money”. All respondents reported that they did not start contributing to the community until such time as they felt that they had a sustainable business. This period varied, one owner/manager suggested four years until he felt he could afford to, whilst another business operator whose company had been operating for 84 years said he still felt uncomfortable doing this because “…you never know just when you need that time or money”.


Of the eight respondents only one had a negative attitude towards CSR: “It’s hard to be responsible (do the right thing) when you see others aren’t, but they are still successful”. The same owner/manager did not consider that “…paying employees regularly and fairly” was regulatory requirement but rather a socially responsible behaviour. This attitude could probably be explained by the owner’s negative attitude towards his seven year old business whose sales had declined over the last two years and was desperate to sell the business.

The issue of ‘doing the right thing’ raises the distinction between strategic and moral behaviour identified by Noland and Phillips (2010). These authors see this distinction undermining rather than enhancing the ‘just’ engagement of stakeholders in CSR activities, because strategic CSR action can be seen as a form of marketing strategy (or ‘spin’) in attempting to boost the firm’s moral stance in a small community. In regional communities, any such strategic behaviour that did not result in concrete CSR results would be quickly recognized as such and would create negative rather than positive implications for the firms’ business image. This issue emerged as a potential problem when integrity and honesty did not gain support from all the owner/managers interviewed. Only one responded that it was crucial to his business success, and none of the other seven mentioned it. When hinted at by another respondent, he offered the view that “…it’s a worthwhile value but unrealistic in today’s competitive environment”.

CONCLUSIONS

Along with the evolutionary path of CSR research that Lee (2008) identifies, this paper has taken both the newly developed avenues of micro organizational-level analysis and non-normative performance-oriented study. This is revealed by the examination of the reality of CSR strategies and practice from the particular perspective of eight SMEs in a small regional community. The results show a very large gap between academic normative CSR proposals and the actual operation of CSR processes. What is
exposed is the complexity of CSR ‘on the ground at the business frontline’. On the one hand, there are the strong positive business gains and community links that such small enterprises recognize and feel obliged to carry out. On the other hand, there is the lack of understanding by these firms of the totality of CSR engagement, and the inability to pursue such a complete strategy due to lack of time, resources and the relative lack of appreciation that their customers and other external stakeholders have about their role in CSR. Complexity arises when responses by the owner/managers show that they clearly see the ‘win-win’ scenario for business, community and the physical environment; but this scenario can never be fully achieved due to the barriers that are inherent within the very circumstances of these relatively small under-resourced firms and communities. This complex dilemma is further made complicated by the inability of the respondents in the interviews to articulate any strong moral position on integrity and honesty when it came to CSR actions.

Whilst being part of the community seems to figure prominently in the cohort of owner/managers interviewed, environmental sustainability raised the greatest number of barriers. What emerged is the issue that if there is not enough stakeholder (especially customer) support for environmental sustainability then it seems, according to this cohort, unlikely that businesses will engage in any significant environmentally sustainable practices. In the context of issues like huge water shortage in Australia and global issues of peak oil and climate change, this utilitarian attitude to the damage that commercial enterprise has inflicted on the ecosystem is a serious problem to be addressed for any normative CSR strategy. Especially in the context of small regional communities in which exists strong denial that such environmental damage is anything more than short-term strains that will be overcome when nature will again provide.

Finally it is clear from this study that customers were considered the key driving force to engage in CSR practices, this emerges as crucial for those who are interested in carrying the CSR movement forward particularly within regional business settings. This suggests that public and private
organizations should develop strategies to seek to engage customers, as important stakeholders, for effective integration of CSR initiatives. Most particularly, if the majority of customers pay no attention on how degradation of environment could cause a significant consequence for human lives and climate, the CSR movement may stall and fail to contribute in the attainment of its wider goal of sustainable development. Then what is required is an effort to create awareness by customers and other stakeholders about environmental degradation, as well as building partnership of customer groups with agencies or initiatives that work for sustainable development (e.g. sustainability streets, transition towns, community gardens, wildlife protection). Such a strategy requires a much wider and thoroughgoing normative CSR research agenda than has been evident so far.

REFERENCES


### Table 1: Characteristics of the SMEs Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SMEs Studied</th>
<th>ANZSIC Classification</th>
<th>Industry Sector</th>
<th>Number of Employees</th>
<th>Number of Years in Business</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>Printing and service to printing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>Textile fibre, yarn and woven fabric manufacturing</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>Cafés and restaurants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>Clubs</td>
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<td>Furniture manufacturing</td>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>Building completion services</td>
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<td>H</td>
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<td>Other construction services</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
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</table>

1The ANZSIC classification is at the lowest level of specificity, that of 3-digit industry level. For more details see Australian Bureau of Statistics, Cat No. 8221.0. Manufacturing Industry: Industry Performance by ANZSIC Class; Australia; 2001/02 to 2004/05.

### Table 2: Dimensions of CSR and their Meaning as Viewed by Interviewed SMEs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of CSR</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Meaning of Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Good business practice</td>
<td>Taking care of employees, job security, supporting work-life balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employee welfare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good customer service</td>
<td>Give customers what they want, High level of customer satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>Firm’s impact on the community, Community involvement and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Environmental sustainability</td>
<td>Being ecologically responsible</td>
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