

A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR CSR IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT FROM ORGANIZATION AND CSR BENEFICIARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

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Though organizations make massive expenditures in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, they fail to gauge the social and economic impact on the beneficiaries (Barnett, Henriques, & Husted, 2020). This study aims to provide a comprehensive framework that enables CSR activity identification, implementation, and impact assessment for an organization, considering the perspectives of important stakeholders in the CSR activity. First, the paper reviews the research literature related to CSR and CSR impact assessment and proposes a framework that addresses the research gaps found in the literature. The five-step framework for CSR activity identification, implementation, and impact assessment infuses the stakeholder perspective. It identifies the broad parameters that can be used to assess the impact of the CSR activity. Suggested criteria entail qualitative and quantitative evaluation practices, thus ensuring holistic impact assessment (Drews, 2010; Weber, 2008). The framework will enable transparent reporting of CSR expenditure and ensure disclosure of the actual impact made by CSR at the ground level. The accountability in reporting through the framework will curb CSR washing and decoupling. The stakeholder perspective emphasizing CSR beneficiaries and the impact assessment parameters provide a novel way of implementing and assessing CSR activity.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR Impact Assessment, CSR Implementation, CSR Governance

Authors' individual contribution: Conceptualization — A.D.; Methodology — A.D.; Resources — H.M.; Writing — Original Draft — A.D.; Writing — Review & Editing — H.M.; Visualization — H.M.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) includes practices and policies that reflect the responsibility of business organizations towards society and is considered as “giving back to society” in return for the resources provided by it (Barnett, Henriques, & Husted, 2020; Gon & Mititelu, 2016). The roots of CSR can be traced back to Western Europe and North America (Davidson et al., 2018). In recent years, the scale of CSR has become huge. The annual

spending by Fortune 500 firms on corporate philanthropy alone exceeds \$15 billion (Barnett et al., 2020). The governments of many countries have formulated statutory regulations for CSR spending “By 2015, 98.4% of world top 64 economies have instituted a total of 366 policy instruments, among which 64.2% are mandatory” (Singh, Holvoet, & Pandey, 2018, p. 1). As the ethical responsibility of the corporates advanced, CSR manifested as mandatory law in many countries (Dyczkowska, Krasodomska, & Michalak, 2016; Davidson et al., 2018).

CSR has become a black box as stakeholders have little knowledge about the process and impact created by CSR (Velte, 2019). Although companies engage in the evaluation practice of CSR activities, transparency and accountability of the outcomes have remained a significant concern (Singh et al., 2018). Apart from involvement in corporate decision-making, disclosing vital information to these stakeholders constitutes essential for stakeholder theory (Aggarwal & Singh, 2018). Thus, stakeholders expect disclosure of non-financial information and accountable reporting with the pressing demand for a transparent CSR process (Yeung, 2018; Aggarwal & Singh, 2018). For many organizations, CSR impact assessment is almost non-existent. For those involved in impact assessment, the processes are either vague or unscientific, thus making it difficult to derive a conclusion.

Though literature related to CSR has piled up in recent decades, even prominent studies have fallen short of assessing the social impact of the CSR initiatives undertaken by business organizations (Barnett et al., 2020). No streamlined processes or frameworks are available in the literature to test whether CSR is impactful or not (Barnett et al., 2020). The monitoring mechanisms need to be set up to ensure that CSR activities contribute to society's sustainability and social issues (Baumgartner, 2014). Many dimensions must be considered while setting up the monitoring and evaluation strategy of CSR activities. These include investors' expectations, corporate governance, the view of the board of directors, increasing the scope of disclosure of environmental and other issues, and government regulators (Strandberg, 2007). These parties constitute most of the stakeholders of the organization, thus involving them in the formulation of monitoring and impact assessment policy.

However, an often-neglected stakeholder in the CSR process is the local community or beneficiary of CSR (Barnett et al., 2020). The recent CSR literature has focussed on stakeholders like consumers, employees, and investors (Yoo & Lee, 2018; Tourky, Kitchen, & Shaalan, 2019). Still, no attention has been paid to the targeted beneficiaries or community as stakeholders, who are at the receiving end of CSR. This might lead to a poor fit between the CSR initiatives and community needs, thus digressing from the CSR goal of the organization. Research suggests the holistic stakeholder approach, especially public participation, should be accounted for while formulating the impact assessment framework for the organization (Palerm, 2000; Taghian, D'Souza, & Polonsky, 2015).

This paper attempts to synthesize a framework that organizations can use for CSR activity identification and implementation. Drawing from the limitations of previous studies, the paper further attempts to gauge the social impact of CSR undertaken both quantitatively and qualitatively and identify the stakeholders involved in the impact assessment. Broad parameters for such stakeholders' impact assessment are also identified. The paper does a thorough literature review and aims to 1) review the literature and identify practical and theoretical research gaps; 2) build a general framework that presents CSR's schematic and

sequential process from activity identification and implementation to revision of CSR policy and CSR impact assessment; 3) under the aegis of stakeholder theory in CSR, to identify the broad parameters that can help assess social impact gauged from the perspective of various stakeholders like the organization's top management and the community and beneficiary targeted.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 elaborates on the literature review. Section 3 discusses the proposed framework and the stakeholders involved. Section 4 provides the results and discussion, followed by the conclusion, managerial and theoretical implications, limitations, and future scope in Section 5.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A detailed literature review was carried out. Databases such as Scopus, EBSCO, Jstor, Proquest, and Emerald were searched for the relevant literature. The search engine Google Scholar was also used for the literature search to ensure that no relevant literature was missed. Key terms used for the search of the papers were "corporate social responsibility", "corporate social responsibility impact assessment", "corporate social responsibility governance framework", and "social impact assessment". Forty-two papers were identified and analyzed for the literature review.

The CSR concept is based on stakeholder management theory (Carroll, 2015), which states that businesses have duties to various groups, including shareholders. Unlike the traditional legal/economic approach, today, no single stakeholder is responsible for survival and progress (Lee, Park, & Lee, 2013). As a result, stakeholder theory provides an appropriate framework for this research (Tourky et al., 2019).

The necessity for firms to respond to stakeholder demands is at the heart of CSR. Stakeholder theory asserts that businesses should fairly seek the interests of all stakeholders, including investors, customers, suppliers, employees, the government, the community, and the environment (Clarkson, 1995; Aggarwal & Singh, 2018). Stakeholders include the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), employees and consumers, businesses, and impacted communities (Dahlsrud, 2008). Stakeholder theory recognises that stakeholders have genuine interests in how firms operate and affect society. Stakeholders can influence the performance and reputation of a business. Fordham and Robinson (2018) identify factors such as regulatory and legal framework, company policy, culture, and interpersonal skills to promote stakeholder influence in CSR (Fordham & Robinson, 2018). Agarwal and Singh (2018) recommend following stakeholder theory for appropriate disclosure of information (Aggarwal & Singh, 2018).

For many corporates, CSR has become a public relations (PR) tool. However, before deciding on which CSR activity to invest companies should make sure that there is alignment between CSR activity and the company's vision and mission (Yoo & Lee, 2018). Tourky et al. (2019) suggested that there should be a fit between corporate identity and CSR undertaken.

There is a lack of willingness and readiness to measure and monitor the outcomes of CSR interventions on the part of the companies. Companies face “auditing fatigue” when CSR interventions have to be monitored (Kemp, Owen, & van de Graaff, 2012). Though there are multiple external checks, the focus is on financial compliance rather than assessing the “real” effect that CSR activity brings at the ground level (Singh et al., 2018). CSR reporting will open the “black box” of CSR expenditure and management, thus making the CSR process more sustainable and accountable (Njapha & Lekhanya, 2017; Velte, 2019). Technology solutions like blockchain can make CSR more transparent (Yeung, 2018).

CSR is found to have a significant and positive relationship with firm performance (Mitra, Akhtar, & Gupta, 2018). Sitorus and Sitorus (2017) showed how CSR could impact the relationship between corporate governance and firm value. Sardana, Gupta, Kumar, and Terziovski (2020) analyzed in the study that though CSR affects the firm performance, however, theories such as political corporate social responsibility (PCSR) and corporate political activity (CPA) may not be as useful in emerging economies as they are in the west. Therefore, sustainable development with CSR can be a source of success, innovation, and profitability for companies. There has been a rise in the CSR literature in recent years; however, the scholarly work remains confined to financial performance assessment rather than gauging the effect of CSR activities on the community. Scholars have argued about the array of benefits of undertaking CSR activities, whether financial, relational, or public image. However, there seems to be a scarcity of the mechanisms and processes that could assess the impact of CSR interventions on society (Barnett et al., 2020).

National-level legislative initiatives have mandated CSR in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Subramaniam, Kansal, & Babu, 2017). There has been an ongoing scholarly debate on whether CSR reporting should be mandated or voluntary (Mies & Neergaard, 2020). In some countries, CSR reporting is mandatory, like India, Denmark, and Germany. In Egypt and countries of similar circumstances, most CSR activities are inclined towards philanthropy and less towards human development issues. CSR in Mexico has led to local community development, with territorialization and different CSR activities as a suggested course of action (Garcia-Chiang, 2018). Formal frameworks are required to connect sustainable development goals (SDGs) to CSR initiatives (Abdelhalim & Eldin, 2019). In India, companies must undertake CSR activities and spend a specified portion of their profits on CSR activities if they earn beyond a certain amount of revenue (Subramaniam et al., 2017). Analysis of industry-specific reports reveals the Indian companies acting in CSR activities. For instance, automotive companies in India like Hero Motocorp, Tata Motors, Maruti Suzuki, Mahindra and Mahindra, Bajaj Auto, and Apollo tyres are five top-rated companies in terms of CSR activities (Gupta & Bhatia, 2015).

Social impact in terms of CSR activity can be referred to as the change in people's way of life, culture, community, and political systems (Vanclay, Esteves, Aucamp, & Franks, 2015). Social impact assessment refers to analysing, monitoring, and

managing the social consequences of such planned activities (Esteves, Franks, & Vanclay, 2012). CSR and social impact assessment (SIA) share fundamental values, and CSR is considered to be the dowager cousin of SIA (Bice, 2015). There has been an increasing interest in social impact research, especially in measurement and valuation (Baraibar-Diez, Luna, Odriozola, & Llorente, 2020). Good practices in SIA propagate community inclusion with participatory processes involving all the stakeholders in the assessment processes (Arce-Gomez, Donovan, & Bedggood, 2015).

Many frameworks are given in the literature based on the triple bottom line that enables the consideration of social development, environmental protection, and economic development issues in CSR activities (Lin, Madu, Kuei, Tsai, & Wang, 2014). These frameworks consider the impact of CSR activities on the environment, community, human capital, shareholders, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders (Aravossis & Panayiotou, 2006). Buhman, Jonsson, and Fisker (2020) discuss how PCSR can contribute to the due diligence of human rights and the United Nations (UN) SDGs (Buhmann, Jonsson, & Fisker, 2019). Many international frameworks have been opted for by various companies to bring about transparency and accountability in the CSR processes of the firm (Miller, Buys, & Summerville, 2007). UN Global Compact is a voluntary platform that presents a framework that contains ten sustainability principles to be followed by the corporates/companies. The principles cater to four dimensions human rights, labour, environment, and anti-corruption (Brown, Clark, & Buono, 2018). The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is another voluntary initiative that promotes sustainability reporting of businesses based on the triple bottom line: economic, environmental, and social. GRI offers a reporting standard for preparing sustainability reports (Singh et al., 2018). Others include the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, the Carbon Disclosure Project, the MSCI World ESG Index, ISO family of standards (Castka, Bamber, Bamber, & Sharp, 2004; Lu, Ren, Lin, He, & Streimikis, 2019).

There is a need for a framework that can enable the companies to identify the relevant sustainability issues. Simultaneously, a single standard mechanism is available for measuring CSR performance (Quiroz-Onate & Aitken, 2007).

Prior research attempts have been made to establish the CSR governance frameworks. Such frameworks involve aligning CSR activities with the company's vision, mission, and values and developing CSR monitoring and evaluation (Aravossis & Panayiotou, 2006; Strandberg, 2007). However, a holistic approach including all the stakeholders can ensure comprehensiveness in the impact assessment of CSR activity (Palerm, 2000; Taghian et al., 2015). Integrated reporting can fulfil this objective and contribute to better CSR planning and implementation (Dragu, 2018). Companies are inclined towards qualitative assessment of CSR, however quantifying the social impact can yield rich results (Rawhouser, Cummings, & Newbert, 2019). Both qualitative and quantitative evaluation and impact assessment ensure that all dimensions and stakeholders are examined in the process (Drews, 2010; Weber, 2008).

3. PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Many stakeholders are involved in the CSR activity process. This includes the top management, which decides the CSR activity be carried out, finalizes and allocates the budget, the CSR department that implements the activity at ground level, and the beneficiaries at the receiving end.

Figure 1 presents the five-step general framework for CSR activity identification, implementation, and impact assessment. The first step involves the CSR activity identification to be undertaken by the organizations. Identifying such activity would include carrying out the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis and political, economic, social and technological (PEST) analysis to examine the activity from all aspects (Aravossis & Panayiotou, 2006). Budgetary constraints and the significance of the activity in the context of the vision and mission of the organization need to be gauged before finalizing the activity (Strandberg, 2007). CSR laws and mandates of the country in context need to be considered to ensure that the CSR law states the activity undertaken. The second step involves the identification of the geographic regions where the CSR activity will be conducted. The organizations need to identify the problems faced by the community in the selected geographic region and align the CSR activity to redress the same.

Before proceeding further with CSR activity, the demographic dividend and economic information about the geographic region need to be gathered. This can be done by collaborating with government authorities and NGOs working in the geographic region. The third and most critical step is the implementation of CSR activity which the organization has decided. This step would also involve the recruitment of volunteers and expenditure of folio maintenance. The data needs to be collected from all the stakeholders involved in the CSR activity. Data collection would ensure

systematic capturing of the data to review the progress of CSR activity and ensure the future efficiency of the activity implementation. The fourth step involves the regular monitoring, analysis, and follow-up of the CSR activity implemented. This is a necessary step as it involves understanding the opinion of the beneficiaries and whether they are able to receive the benefit of CSR. This can be done either in the form of interviews or surveys undertaken with the help of volunteers. Beneficiaries need to be asked whether there is a congruence between the problem faced by the community and the CSR initiative launched. Proper feedback on the activity, its implementation process, and the personnel involved need to be obtained to identify the loopholes in the process and redress them efficiently. The last step consists of analyzing all the data captured and feedback received and compiling them. This collected data is then analyzed to see which feedback can be incorporated to improvise the CSR activity.

A comprehensive CSR impact assessment requires all stakeholders to be considered in the evaluation. The two most important stakeholders in this context are the CSR department of the organization and the beneficiaries. Figure 2 provides common broad parameters that can be used for the impact assessment in both the stakeholders. Considering these broad parameters, quantified survey questionnaires or qualitative semi-structured interviews can be prepared considering the CSR activity undertaken and the community problem faced. Tables 1 and 2 depict questions that the CSR department needs to answer for the impact assessment. Table 1 describes the CSR department's questions to gauge their performance and do a self-audit. Table 2 shows the CSR department's questions to ask the beneficiaries to understand if CSR is creating the actual impact or not. These questions should preferably be asked via an independent third-party assessor to make the process fair and unbiased.

Table 1. Questions for the CSR department for impact assessment

No.	Questions	Sub-questions
1.	Has enough awareness been created about the CSR activity?	What are the mediums through which awareness can be created - newspaper, radio, pamphlets, skits/plays, door-to-door campaigning? Is everyone aware of the CSR initiative in the targeted geographic region?
2.	Is CSR activity appropriately implemented?	Are all targeted beneficiaries been catered to by CSR? Are any problems arising in the process of implementation?
3.	Is CSR activity appropriately governed?	Is the CSR department able to govern and monitor the CSR properly on and off the ground? Are there any hurdles arising in governance and monitoring?
4.	Is targeted benefit being yielded by CSR activity?	Are targeted beneficiaries able to avail of the benefit? Is there any improvement in the socio-economic status of beneficiaries?
5.	Is there any facilitation required after activity implementation?	Are volunteers and the CSR department able to provide the required assistance to beneficiaries when needed?
6.	Feedback from the beneficiaries	Is feedback collected from the beneficiaries? Are the suggestions given incorporated into the CSR?

Table 2. Questions for beneficiaries for impact assessment

No.	Questions	Sub-questions
1.	Was enough awareness created about the CSR activity?	Through which medium did the beneficiary get to know about the CSR activity?
2.	Was CSR activity appropriately implemented?	Did they find any problem or loophole in the implementation process that can be improvised in the future?
3.	Was CSR activity appropriately governed?	Did they feel CSR activity is monitored and regularly and effectively?
4.	Did CSR activity yield benefits?	Did they feel there has been an improvement in socio-economic status or any other aspect of life?
5.	Was facilitation provided after CSR activity was implemented?	Were volunteers and the CSR department helpful when assistance was required from them?
6.	Was feedback on the activity collected?	Were their suggestions being asked for and incorporated into the CSR?

Figure 1. The five-step general framework for CSR activity identification, implementation, and impact assessment

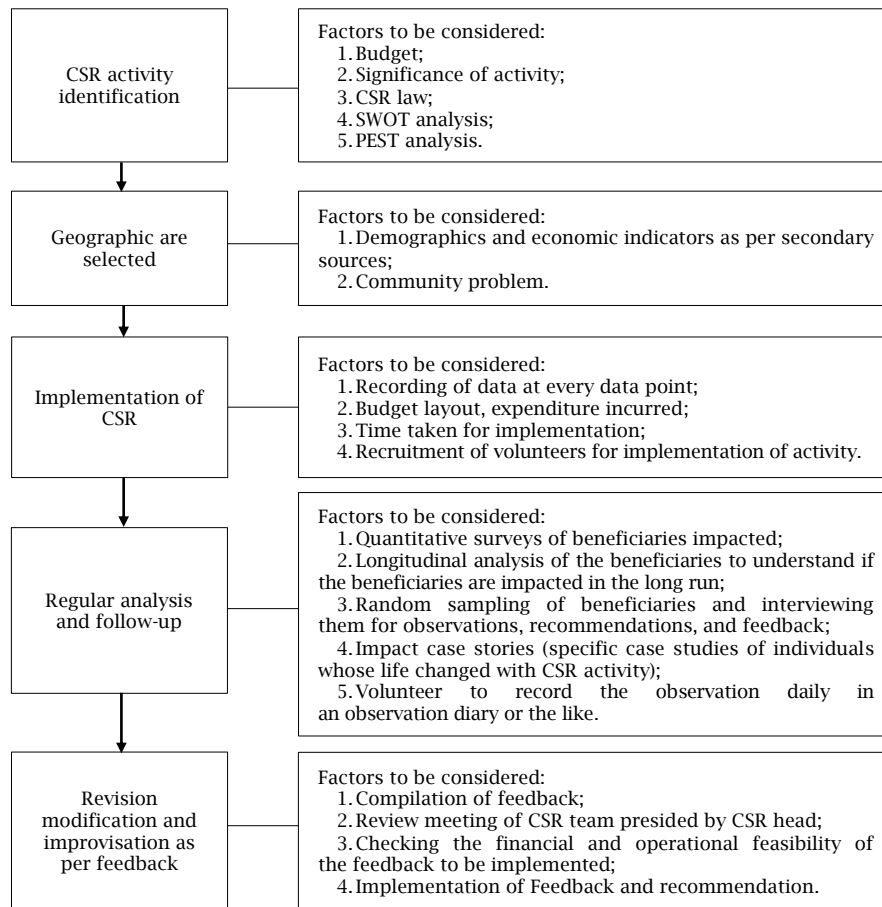


Figure 2. Broad parameters for stakeholders (CSR department and beneficiaries) impact assessment



4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Though CSR impact assessment frameworks have been discussed in prior research, the frameworks suggested giving the birds’ eye view of the CSR policy implementation and assessment instead of gauging the impact at the ground level where CSR activity is undertaken (Drews, 2010; Weber, 2008). The proposed conceptual framework provides a streamlined, defined process that the organization can follow while pursuing the organizational CSR goals. From activity identification to the revision of

CSR policy, the framework sums up all the activities of CSR under one umbrella framework. Such a framework would address the various concerns that the prior research studies have raised. Firstly, the lack of attention given to the CSR impact assessment, the framework lays down the parameters against which impact assessment can be undertaken (Barnett et al., 2020). Secondly, the framework considers social impact as a multidimensional construct by assessing the impact qualitatively and quantitatively (Rawhouser et al., 2019). Thirdly, the framework will redress the issue of

untransparent CSR reporting by the organization, which is difficult to assess the impact generated by CSR. Lastly, stakeholder involvement constitutes the primary concern among scholars regarding CSR impact assessment (O’Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013; Connor & Spangenberg, 2008). The framework considers two significant stakeholders involved in CSR: the organization’s CSR department and the beneficiaries of the CSR activity.

The paper attempts to provide the broad parameters that can be used to develop metrics or questionnaires to survey the various stakeholders (Hess, 2014). The beneficiaries’ feedback against such broad parameters would ensure real-time problem redressal, less wastage of funds, optimum utilization of resources, and achievement of CSR goals. It will also ensure the good performance of the CSR department and the volunteers. For an accurate assessment of the impact of CSR, it is suggested to quantify the social impact rather than using it as a generalizable or single-dimensional construct (Rawhouser et al., 2019). As indicated by many other studies, an appropriate approach towards evaluation is a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Drews, 2010; Weber, 2008). A combination of these approaches would include investment appraisal, qualitative evaluation of individual CSR activities, and evaluation of all relevant stakeholders (Drews, 2010; Weber, 2008). The framework consists of both qualitative and quantitative criteria for assessing the impact comprehensively.

Such a transparent framework can ensure accountability in CSR activities and ward off any claims of CSR washing that the companies are alleged with (Pope & Wæraas, 2016). Such a framework can also prevent companies from indulging in decoupling, where the policies on the documentation and on-ground practices differ drastically (Bice, 2015). Recent studies have shown that CSR inclusion as non-financial information in the company’s annual report yields positive stakeholder responses. The proposed framework can facilitate such disclosure by providing schematic details on CSR and its impact (Yoo & Lee, 2018). Sustainable reporting with an accountable and transparent framework will ensure no greenwashing of CSR (Velte, 2019). Yeung (2018) proposed integrating quality management systems and corporate social responsibility with blockchain to enhance trust and governance.

CSR management research has highlighted the need for community involvement, accountability, and stakeholder involvement in decision-making (Njapha & Lekhanya, 2017). There has been a substantial increase in studies showing the impact of stakeholders on CSR, including the local communities (Fordham & Robinson, 2018). A framework involving all the stakeholders, including the company’s top management, employees, customers, local communities, and NGOs, would ensure a bird’s-eye view of the CSR initiatives and their impact gauged from multiple perspectives (Fordham & Robinson, 2018). The companies should undertake such activities where the corporate identity and CSR are congruent (Tourky et al., 2019). After finding the fit between CSR and corporate identity, the companies should aim for “territorialization” of CSR, that is, assessment and governance as per the territory targeted for CSR initiatives (Garcia-Chiang, 2018). As referred to in the framework, the involvement of

the local community or beneficiary would ensure that social problems in the targeted area are correctly identified, and an articulated action plan is devised to redress them. This results in CSR outcomes with strategic benefits for companies and the involvement of stakeholders in corporate decision-making.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to draw a framework that organizations can use to identify, implement, and impact the assessment of CSR activity. The paper identifies the main stakeholders and infuses the stakeholder perspective into the framework. The broad parameters for such stakeholders’ impact assessment are also determined. This framework can be used both for qualitative and quantitative evaluation of CSR activity. Such a framework would be readily applicable to any specific type of CSR activity undertaken by any organization or any particular activity undertaken in any geographic area.

The framework can facilitate the organizations to identify the appropriate CSR activity as per their vision and mission, financial outlay, and the law of the land.

The paper has attempted to redress the research gaps highlighted by the previous studies. The study provides a framework not just for the CSR activity identification but for the process implementation and the impact assessment, thus redressing the significant research gap highlighted by Barnett et al. (2020) regarding the lack of research impetus in the impact assessment. The framework follows a holistic approach to cater to all the stakeholders, especially the beneficiaries of the CSR activity, thus adhering to the holistic stakeholder approach (Palerm, 2000; Taghian et al., 2015). Regular analysis and follow-up in the impact assessment process would require a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to identify the shortcomings in the implementation (Drews, 2010; Rawhouser et al., 2019).

It will enable the organizations to identify beneficiaries’ exact problems and redress them, thus ensuring that CSR funds are directed to genuine causes. The generic nature of the framework enables its implementation across any type of organization. The established mechanism will ensure transparency and accountability in the CSR process (Singh et al., 2018). With the recent mandate of CSR activity impact assessment in India, a defined process of CSR activity identification, implementation, and governance has become the need of the hour (Rao, 2021).

The study is not devoid of limitations. The framework does not constitute the perspectives of other significant stakeholders such as investors, government, etc. The framework developed is generic, and deviations might occur when implemented in a specific type of CSR activity or specific geographic region. Future research can be done by applying the framework in certain CSR practices and developing the metrics against the parameters suggested. The framework tried to address the theoretical gaps in the literature; however, practical insights need to be considered to make the framework more robust for practical application. CSR managers can be interviewed in future research about the efficacy of such a framework on the practical front.

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