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CSR In The Service Of The Brand Image Of Globalized Companies

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The main objective of this study was to examine the role of CSR as a strategic lever in shaping the diplomatic efforts of globalized companies operating in Algeria's mining sector. It focuses on analyzing how CSR can contribute to the enhancement and reinforcement of the brand image of these globalized companies.

Methodology: A qualitative research approach was adopted within an entrepreneurial framework. A total of 43 in-depth interviews were conducted, involving various stakeholders associated with Lafarge-Algeria, a prominent MNC recognized as one of the country's leading non-oil exporters. The collected data were systematically organized, analyzed, and validated.

Findings: The results showed that CSR constitutes a crucial lever of CD. They emphasize a significant correlation between CSR and the enhancement of the image of MNCs. CSR practices were found to be deeply rooted in the integration of the local socio-economic and cultural context into corporate strategic development. This connection becomes especially clear in how businesses shape their identity and participate in CSR initiatives.

Value Added: This study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on CSR by providing empirical evidence on the link between the adoption of a CSR approach, diplomatic practices, and the enhancement of corporate image within Algeria's mining sector—a subject that remains largely unexplored in the context of emerging economies. In doing so, it adds meaningful value to a body of literature that has predominantly focused on developed economies.

Recommendations: Based on the results, it is recommended that MNCs consider CSR as an essential component of CD, serving as a driver of competitiveness and corporate image. To further strengthen their reputation, companies should integrate ethical and sustainable standards into their strategies, ensure transparency by informing and communicating about their actions and impacts, and actively engage with local stakeholders. This includes improving working conditions and contributing to the overall quality of life within the communities in which they operate.

Key words: corporate diplomacy, sustainable development, CSR, competitiveness, brand image, MNCs, projects

JEL Codes: D6, E2, F5, L1

Introduction

In today's changing international context, where different agents, groups, and even nations frequently oppose one another, only a diplomatic approach has a chance of leading to consensus-based solutions that are acceptable to all stakeholders. As a result, diplomacy has become universal and omnipresent.

When a multinational corporation (MNC) decides to expand or establish itself in a country or region, its international commitment exposes it to a variety of political, geopolitical, and socioeconomic risks, while also opening the door to unexpected economic opportunities. In this context, it is imperative for MNEs to discern the main geopolitical trends, anticipate risks, and effectively manage all stakeholders, whether internal or external. The ultimate goal is twofold: to defend their interests while generating profits and strengthening their image. Thus, developing a corporate diplomacy (CD) strategy becomes essential. This strategy enables interaction with stakeholders, whether local or international, within a coherent and integrated framework. It helps build lasting and mutually beneficial relationships while helping the company influence its global and local environment in its favor. Furthermore, adopting such an approach provides the company the ability to gather the information necessary to support and optimize its internationalization process.

In this perspective, as was the objective of this study, it is essential to consider the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a potential lever for corporate diplomacy in a globalized context. CSR contributes significantly to the creation of a positive and sustainable image, thereby promoting the strategic and international success of companies.

Research problem

That being said, this study examined, more specifically, the importance of companies taking CSR into account as a powerful lever that could enable them to participate in multilateral sustainable development (SD) programs, as well as the conditions for responsible SD, while placing the issues inherent in corporate governance at the heart of the analysis. Thus, its objective is to respond to the following questions: What is the link between CSR and CD? Is CD an important component of CSR? How does CSR contribute to the development and improvement of the brand image of multinational companies? These are the questions we attempted to answer in this research, by studying the interest shown in CSR by globalized companies operating in Algeria in order to better measure the impact of their actions both on stakeholders and in terms of promoting and strengthening their brand image.

Hypotheses

Given the research questions posed, a working hypothesis was formulated in order to try to explain the link that exist between CSR, CD, and brand image enhancement. Thus, we support the idea that CSR is an important diplomatic lever available to companies to defend and improve their reputation and image (legitimacy) with their internal and external stakeholders.

Study objectives

The effectiveness of a CSR policy in enabling globalized companies to achieve the diplomatic objectives of their international development strategy aimed at strengthening their brand image is undeniable. It can indeed fill the gap regarding the effect of the work context and the attractiveness of the offer on legitimacy, project acceptability, and competitiveness. Thus, the objective of the study was to understand the issue of CSR in a multinational company operating in the mining sector in Algeria, namely Lafarge-Algeria. In recent years, this company, which is considered one of the leading non-oil exporting multinationals in the

country, has taken initiatives in the area of CSR by creating structures to carry out this mission. In doing so, we first tried to identify the actions taken with regard to local stakeholders in diplomatic events related in particular to the management and development of local staff, and secondly, we highlighted the impact of these actions in terms of their contribution to the company's development and competitiveness. Furthermore, this analysis also explores how their actions complement SD goals and contribute to circularity, all of which are essential aspects for aligning their practices with current global priorities.

Research methodology

In our research, we adopted a diplomatic approach in the entrepreneurial environment. The data collection tools used were designed based on the research objectives and questions. The study combined conceptual and theoretical aspects tracing the importance of companies as major actors in development and their policies, CSR in particular, with empirical aspects analyzing the latter practice in the case of globalized companies in Algeria. In order to identify existing definitions and theories on CD and CSR, a systematic review was conducted. This method allowed us to address multiple specific questions and to carry out an in-depth analysis of the literature examined and increasingly used in the field. This study adopted a qualitative approach that aimed to analyze the socially responsible aspects of Lafarge-Algeria's activities. It was also based on a data collection approach.

Study structure

In order to answer our questions and ensure that all aspects of the subject were taken into consideration, we have structured our study around three main areas, in line with the research objectives set:

- Theoretical framework: debate,
- Field of investigation and research methodology,
- Empirical study: case of the Lafarge-Algeria Company.

Theoretical framework: debate

The concept of SD is now an important part of the social environment of businesses. This notion was introduced into the political arena (at the end of 1987) by Norwegian Minister G.H. Brundtland, with the aim of remedying ecological damage. The central idea is based on meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, thus reconciling environmental protection, social progress, and economic development (Brundtland, 1987).

SD gained international status as a paradigm in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio, which defined its legal basis through founding texts such as Agenda 21 and the Framework Convention on Climate Change. This momentum was reinforced in 2002 with the World Summit on SD in Johannesburg. At the same time, Kofi Annan launched the “Global Compact project”¹ on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 1999, aiming to establish a partnership between the UN and the private sector to promote more humane globalization within global society.

In this context, MNEs, as social actors, have an obligation to integrate sustainable practices. They must collaborate with their stakeholders and optimize their eco-efficiency: producing more while reducing their consumption of resources, thereby limiting waste and reducing their environmental impact (Boualam, 2008).

Although initially multinational corporations sought to circumvent their responsibilities by relocating their polluting activities to countries with less stringent environmental and social standards, today they are increasingly inclined to fully assume their responsibilities and adopt an SD’s approach. This shift is taking place in a context marked by growing power struggles between

1 This is a commitment defined with trade union, development, and human rights organizations and confederations (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, etc.), through which companies undertake to implement actions to advance the values of the United Nations system (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, ILO Core Principles, etc.) (World Economic Forum, n.d.).

civil society and locally based MNEs, with local populations now more aware of the impacts of their activities and responding firmly.

CSR, a microeconomic perspective on sustainable development

Howard Bowen undoubtedly marked a key milestone in the development of CSR with his 1953 book, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. In it, he highlights the practices and statements of American managers in the 1950s, thus opening the debate on CSR while establishing a distinction between ownership and management. In 1978, Bowen revisited his initial reflections, acknowledging the idealistic nature of his concept of voluntary social responsibility, and insisted on the need for a more structured and formal approach to operationalize CSR.

According to Bowen (1953), the notion of CSR for business people “refers to their obligations to follow policies, make decisions, or follow guidelines that are desirable in terms of our society’s goals and values (...) they must not disregard socially accepted values or place their own values above those of society”. Thus, CSR is often perceived as a vague concept, but its objective is fundamental: to contribute to the humanization of globalization and regulate the functioning of the capitalist economic model.

Furthermore, in 1975, Preston highlighted the lack of boundaries in the concept of social responsibility and the difficulty of measuring the impact of initiatives in this area. During the 1970s, the concept of “responsiveness” became central to studies conducted in the United States, as evidenced by the work of researchers such as Ackerman (1973), Ackerman & Bauer (1976), Frederick (1978), and Sethi (1979). In addition, Bowen’s proposals concerning social auditing were taken up and further developed by other authors, notably Blum (1958); Bauer & Fenn (1973); Votaw (1973); Carroll & Beiler (1975); and Waddock & Smith (2000).

In 1975, Carroll highlighted three essential dimensions of CSR: the level of CSR, the commitment to finding solutions to social issues, and the fundamental values that guide the meaning of this responsibility. He also distinguished four main types of obligations associated with CSR: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic.

CSR, an evolving and multidimensional concept

Although the concept of CSR is frequently mentioned in contemporary discussions, its definition remains complex due to the multiplicity of existing perspectives and interpretations. Numerous institutions, both regional and international, as well as many authors, have attempted to define the concept. In its third communication on CSR (2011), the European Commission characterizes CSR as “a responsibility of firms for the effects of their activities on society” (cited in Mignon & Sarant, 2016). In a complementary vein, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) (ISO 2010) also emphasizes the role of companies in managing their impact on society and the environment, while advocating ethical and transparent conduct. This framework also includes the need to take into account the expectations of stakeholders.

According to Imbs and Ramboarison-Lalao (2013), CSR corresponds to a company’s integration of the social and environmental expectations of its various stakeholders into the definition of its strategic objectives. Pestre (2011) highlights the increased complexity for globalized companies, which operate in a broader international context. They are subject to pressure from a greater number of stakeholders, whose expectations are more varied and diverse than in a strictly domestic context. Consequently, the process of building a CSR strategy takes into account a high degree of interaction between the three main pillars of a multinational company: headquarters, geographic areas, and subsidiaries.

CSR approach and promoting of the company’s image²: interaction between two concepts

The growing interest in CSR and corporate reputation does not seem to have been clearly identified until now. Indeed, for some authors, CSR is perceived as

2 According to LeBlanc and Nguyen (1995), a company’s image is based on five key elements: corporate identity, physical environment, personality, service offering, and staff in direct contact with customers. Wei (2002), meanwhile, considers that a company’s image corresponds to the perception that stakeholders have of it,

an upstream lever that contributes to building a good reputation for the company. An effective CSR strategy is also synonymous with a healthy and successful company (Binninger & Robert, 2011).

Sprinkle and Maines (2010) identify four main reasons why organizations engage in CSR initiatives. The organizations may have altruistic intentions; they may use CSR activities as a showcase to appease various stakeholder groups; for the potential benefits of recruitment, employee motivation, and retention; and for customer related motivations, as CSR can encourage consumers to buy the company's products and services.

Adopting a CSR approach is therefore a major strategic issue for a company. Not only does it improve its image and reputation (legitimacy), but it also strengthens its relationships with stakeholders (suppliers, subcontractors, and consumers) (Binninger & Robert, 2011). As a result, CSR is a key tool in what could be described as "business diplomacy", an aspect that we will explore in more detail below.

Despite its initial costs for the company, CSR proves to be a crucial lever both operationally (short term) and strategically (long term). It enables companies to increase their competitive advantage and competitiveness. For globalized companies operating in developing or emerging countries, which often face complex challenges (corruption, social inequality, power struggles, deforestation...), CSR offers an opportunity to respond effectively to these challenges. Rather than exploiting the institutional weaknesses inherent in these environments, some companies have been able to use CSR as a solution to address and overcome these challenges (Cezarino et al., 2022).

In the context of developing countries, several obstacles hinder the widespread adoption of a CSR approach. These challenges include the lack of a clear regulatory framework for social and environmental reporting; unfair competition fostered by counterfeiting and the informal economy; the high costs associated with adopting international standards and certifications; an imbalance in government policies on worker and environmental protection; low unionization rates;

while corporate identity refers to the fundamental characteristics that define the organization, its objectives, and its culture.

and a corporate culture that is not conducive to stakeholder engagement. Faced with this reality, it is essential for companies to establish a genuine culture of social responsibility and SD at the heart of their activities.

Corporate diplomacy, a concept in search of a definition

Although globalized companies frequently engage in actions requiring diplomatic behavior in their interactions with stakeholders, the scientific literature on CD remains underdeveloped. Furthermore, no consensus definition has emerged to date, and researchers tend to refer to the same concept using a variety of terms.

Diplomacy, in its traditional political sense, encompasses the management of international relations, the methods used to conduct them, and the skills of the individuals responsible for these interactions, taking into account their associated profession. It can be defined as an art aimed at safeguarding or promoting one's interests while presenting them in a manner acceptable to stakeholders. Today, diplomacy relies on a variety of instruments and extends to several dimensions of public life, particularly those related to the economic sphere. Economic diplomacy has established itself as an essential and common component of the diplomatic functions and activities carried out by various institutions, such as embassies. The latter help companies in their countries to find business opportunities abroad and to pursue their interests there, either through political channels or in the form of professional assistance. In short, economic diplomacy is characterized by the deep integration of economic issues into the diplomatic missions of states (Guesmia, 2022).

Economic diplomacy and CD have a close and complementary relationship, offering a double advantage: on the one hand, they help to strengthen a country's reputation, and on the other, they highlight the products and services offered by its companies. Diplomacy in the business world, known as CD, can be characterized as a strategic function of the company that is inspired by that of states and includes design, representation, negotiation, and forecasting, processes that resemble, particularly in supranational companies, the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Simonneau & Cersa, 2015). Steger (2003) perceives CD as the professional and methodical management of the entrepreneurial environment,

aimed at streamlining interactions and aligning the company's activities with societal expectations. The author draws attention to the fact that contemporary companies are facing the disappearance of geographical boundaries, but also of those between themselves and society. These complex relationships often lead to a lack of clarity in terms of responsibilities and a weakening of mutual trust. From this perspective, CD is similar to an advanced approach to public relations, emphasizing intensive communication between all stakeholders. Lucas (2012) emphasizes that reflecting on the best synergies between the public and private sectors is now a crucial issue.

Mirvis et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of transparent (institutional) communication on the part of the company, pointing out that managers (and senior staff) have a role similar to that of diplomats. They must be attentive to the expectations of their stakeholders and seek to find mutually acceptable solutions. The concept of CD thus represents a form of interface management, a shared space between the company and its partners where it becomes crucial to take different perspectives into account, discuss differences, and use them to reach compromises (Ruël et al., 2013). This approach helps to build trust, which Goodman (2006) identifies as the main objective of CD. Saner et al. (2000) also identifies other objectives associated with this diplomacy in the entrepreneurial environment: influencing economic and social actors to generate new business opportunities; collaborating with supranational organizations to develop international standards governing entrepreneurship; preventing conflicts between stakeholders; and exploiting international forums and communication channels to improve the company's image. For Lucas (2012), CD encompasses a strategic vision and helps to strengthen the company's competitive capabilities by improving its performance.

The role of diplomats has been examined by numerous authors. According to London (1999), diplomats assume responsibility for their own actions, those of their colleagues, and those of others. They are dedicated to defending the entrepreneurial interests of their company while seeking to cooperate with stakeholders whose perspectives may differ or even be opposing. Saner and Yiu (2014) consider that "CD concerns the management of interfaces between an MNC and its external non-commercial counterparts (NGOs, local governments, etc.) that have an impact on the multinational's reputation capital and its

ability to shape and influence its operating environment". Alammam et al (2016) define CD as "establishing and maintaining positive relationships with internal and external, professional and non-professional stakeholders, including employees, businesses, governments, and civil society actors, in order to create and maintain legitimacy and a social license to operate, build alliances, and shape and influence the environment". Today, it could be argued that it is no longer enough to simply defend one's company's positions. It is now necessary to adopt a proactive stance, moving from a defensive strategy to an offensive approach marked by a diplomatic spirit, as suggested by De Raymond (2015).

In general, economic and political literature offers various approaches to analyzing a concept as seemingly broad and vague as that of CD or strategic diplomacy. According to Gomez (2014), it is defined as an entity's ability to mobilize its internal and external networks in order to develop and protect its strategic assets. This implies that companies must forge and maintain strong links with their external environment, as Steger (2003) also points out. Wolters (2012), cited by Attarça (2019), expands on this definition by describing strategic CD as "the establishment, by executives or their representatives, of lasting and positive relationships with foreign governments and non-governmental stakeholders (economic and non-economic) with the aim of creating and developing legitimacy in an international business environment". Fundamentally, CD enables companies to position themselves both in debates and in the realities of international politics, economics, and markets. It is therefore an approach that can be adapted to all types of companies, whether multinational or local, large or small. Furthermore, many authors point out that companies have gradually integrated diplomatic activities into their practices. This innovation is particularly visible in the emergence of new specialized profiles, such as corporate diplomats (Henisz, 2014), who act as intermediaries, facilitators (Saner et al., 2000), or strategic pivots (Dahan et al., 2015) between the organization, its environment, and civil societies.

Company diplomacy and CSR: what is the connection?

In scientific literature, previous studies have explored the conceptual link between CD and CSR (Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2015; White et al., 2011),

while suggesting the integration of CD into a CSR framework. In this vein, the study of White et al. (2011) highlights “the power of companies in society and their responsible use in the political arena”. Extending this line of thinking, Mogensen (2017) and Ordeix-Rigo and Duarte (2009) confirm that “social power and political responsibilities are essential dimensions of CD”. At the same time, other authors, such as Ordeix-Rigo and Duarte (2009) and Weber and Larsson-Olaison (2017), have highlighted that the main challenges related to SD lie in the ability to respond to social pressures exerted by external stakeholders, while reconciling the expectations of the company’s foreign stakeholders in order to strengthen its legitimacy.

Among the strategies identified to address these external pressures in a host country is engagement on social, political, and environmental issues. This approach allows the internationalizing company to participate in global regulation, a process often equated in the literature with CSR policy (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

However, although Westermann-Behaylo et al. (2015) acknowledge that research on CSR policy enriches the concept of CD by “highlighting the influence of non-financial values (...) and the types of public responsibilities that companies can assume by practicing CD”, the theoretical implications related to the interconnection between CD, CSR, and public diplomacy are not sufficiently discussed. The latter is considered a corporate governance activity (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) and defined as the company’s participation in political decision-making in the country where the company is based (Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2015). However, it must be admitted that the ways in which CSR policy theory could develop the understanding and theoretical foundations of CD are rarely explored.

Although in recent years many studies have begun to address this topic—focusing, it is important to note, on developed countries—there is still no consensus on a definition. Nevertheless, it is crucial to continue and intensify efforts to further develop the theory of CD. It is important to note that the work of Westermann-Behaylo et al. (2015), as well as that of White et al. (2011), already integrates the concept of CD into the theoretical frameworks of CSR policies. These studies show that applying CSR principles promotes “the enrichment of the concept of CD and allows for a more comprehensive perspective on it” (Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2015). Furthermore, Molleda (2011)

highlights the role that CD have in relation to CSR, the latter being viewed as a political practice guided by the principles of social responsibility policies. These policies are sometimes described as corporate governance activities (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) and reflect, in particular, companies' involvement in the decision-making processes of the host country (Westermann-Behaylo et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the mechanisms enabling theoretical approaches to CSR policies to further deepen the understanding and conceptual foundations of CD remain largely unexplored. This study aimed to address this gap by delving deeper into the subject, with a specific focus on globalized companies operating within an emerging economy – namely Algeria. These companies are active in the mining sector, an industry known for its substantial environmental and social impacts. As such, the need to establish robust social responsibility policies becomes critical, both to enhance their brand reputation and to ensure the legitimacy and acceptance of their projects, among other factors.

Corporate diplomacy tools in CSR

Beyond the involvement of local managers in the administration of subsidiaries in their host territories, globalized companies use various diplomatic mechanisms to strengthen their legitimacy and promote their products. Several levers can be identified among these initiatives. First, training is a key strategy. The training centers developed by these companies prepare their employees to become true ambassadors, both for organizational practices and for the products they sell. Participation in these training programs generates personal fulfillment among employees, which have a decisive role in strengthening their commitment to the values and identity of the organization. In addition, this approach helps improve interpersonal relationships within the company. Second, normalization and standards, which are the pillars of economic development, have a central role. Companies strive to disseminate their norms and standards beyond local borders. The more territories that adopt these standards, the more feasible it becomes to expand their market through an approach based on economic and strategic intelligence. Thirdly, promoting shared values is also a major objective

in an integrative economic approach. The consideration of environmental and social issues, reinforced by the advent of the concept of SD, particularly through the rise of renewable energies and energy efficiency solutions, etc., reflects this strategic orientation. In this context, the promotion of diplomatic dynamics through multilateral agreements is part of the desire for diplomacy oriented towards SD. In conclusion, it can be said, in line with the work of Asquer (2012), that both CD and CSR approaches are strategic tools for managing interactions with stakeholders and preserving corporate reputation.

In conclusion, and based on the points developed above, within the framework of the approach that considers CD as an integral component of CSR, this study aimed to contribute to research on these two concepts and to enhance the brand image of globalized companies by developing a clear definition that is particularly suited to the context of emerging economies, especially rentier states. We are thus laying the foundations for future empirical analyses on the use and effects of CSR and CD. After exploring various definitions, it was essential to propose a formula that met the requirements of our research: a professional and intelligent approach to managing the socio-economic and political environment, aimed at ensuring optimal conduct of activities while promoting constructive and sustainable interaction between the company and its various stakeholders.

Field of Investigation and Research Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach in the entrepreneurial environment to examine the impact of CSR on the brand image of Lafarge-Algeria as a globalized company. Qualitative interviews were conducted with around forty-three (43) participants (most of whom had higher education) in order to better understand perceptions of CSR practices and the importance of having a good CSR policy. The

participants were selected using purposive sampling (a non-probabilistic method) to ensure that stakeholders from different departments of the company and civil society were represented (see Table 1 below). The period analyzed covers the years 2012 to 2023³.

This method was chosen in order to gather different points of view (perceptions of stakeholders) on the issue of CSR within the company. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face (in person) or via email, depending on the availability of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 40 minutes and was conducted in French or Arabic, depending on the participants' preferred language. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, and the data were sorted, analyzed, and verified. A thematic analysis was also used to examine and interpret the themes and trends that emerged from the various responses.

Table 1. Methodology and Study Sample Characteristic

Nature of interviewees	General information about the field study	Quality of respondents	Number of people
Internal stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Qualitative data - Semi-structured interviews: main tool used 	Employees, Managers	14
External stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Objective: to identify stakeholders' views on CSR practices at Lafarge subsidiaries 	communities, customers, suppliers, government agencies	29

Source: developed by the author.

3 This choice is motivated, on the one hand, by the gradual opening up of the Algerian economy to international investors, which has created a need to adapt the legal and regulatory framework. On the other hand, this choice is explained by the growing importance of integrating CSR strategies observed in many developed countries. Furthermore, the relatively recent presence of Lafarge in Algeria, since 2008, as well as its rapid expansion in the local market and its commitment to social and environmental issues, particularly due to the polluting impact of its activities (construction materials), also justify this study period.

Research approach

Based on existing theoretical and conceptual support, available resources from the business community, our own interviews with employees, managers, and certain civil society actors in the regions where Lafarge operates, and an analysis of the content (reading and accounting analysis of the company's cash flow and social spending), we have sought to identify the company's social and environmental actions and achievements, as well as its diplomatic practices in its relations with the various stakeholders, their strengths and weaknesses, and their prospects. Lafarge Holcim⁴ is a multinational corporation that has been internationally oriented since its creation, and therefore has considerable experience operating in different sociocultural environments, with the resulting advantages and difficulties.

The objective of our interviews with several people (employees, citizens, managers, in particular) was to identify progressive trends in stakeholder involvement in the implementation of socially responsible actions, including CD, and the trends conveyed and developed by Lafarge subsidiaries. At first glance, we observed that the latter sometimes more or less automatically integrate their current practices into the process of social and environmental protection in Algerian companies, where neither the mindset nor the institutional framework was ready for this. Consequently, it would be interesting to study how socially responsible practices contribute to the development, competitiveness, and acceptability of Lafarge's projects (and their adaptation to the local social and cultural context).

Thus, to better understand the importance of CSR as an important component of CD, we focused on the relationships between the company and its stakeholders in the context of the actions taken and the impact of these actions on the image and reputation of Lafarge and its products, and to understand the extent to which the company's diplomatic attitude toward stakeholders

4 In Algeria, following the acquisition of the Orascom Group in 2008, Lafarge created a new subsidiary, Lafarge Algeria. This provided it with access to markets in the Middle East and Africa. This strategic decision enabled Lafarge to establish a presence in Algeria as a producer and exporter to African countries (LafargeHolcim, 2016).

encourages the involvement of local actors in the management and implementation of projects.

These are the reasons why we chose the Lafarge Group⁵ for this study: Lafarge ranks as one of the leading private entities in Algeria, alongside Tosyali in the textile/steel sectors and Intradis Agricole Group. It is also a prominent non-hydrocarbon exporter in the country. The company operates in a strategic sector, but one with significant social and environmental impacts. In this case, the adoption of a CSR approach in this company represents a new area of control for its stakeholders. Internationally, Lafarge has taken an important position, benefiting from complementarity and synergy between its global and local activities. From this perspective, Lafarge must adapt to its environment in Algeria in terms of CSR.

Lafarge Algeria staff were asked about the following topics: their knowledge of CSR and the actions taken in this regard; corporate identity and values, their societal practices (relations with customers, suppliers, civil society); their social practices (combating discrimination within the company and social dialogue); their environmental practices (prudent management of resources and energy, preservation of the natural environment); their governance practices and internal organization.

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- 5 LafargeHolcim has positioned itself in global and national markets thanks to its various competitive advantages. This has enabled it to become a leader in the construction materials sector, namely through the quality of its product range, its service, its compliance with standards, and the quality of its management.

In accordance with international standards, all Lafarge cements are certified NA442-2013 according to Algerian standards and EN197-1 according to European standards (LafargeHolcim, 2017). A high level of service quality, supporting wholesalers in product sales, thanks to field agents known as FSOs, hired by Lafarge Algeria to strengthen customer loyalty and relationships (LafargeHolcim, 2018). In addition to these advantages, LafargeHolcim adopts commercial strategies that generally depend on the nature of the target market, the environment, and the competition. Its strengths include its reputation as a global market leader; its availability to serve customers; the development of employee skills; an international working environment with teams of various nationalities; diversification of its product offering; high-level innovation capacity; and respect for its social and environmental commitments.

Furthermore, as the main objective of our study was to effectively analyze the brand image of Lafarge Algeria and better understand how it is perceived by various stakeholders, it is essential that we conduct an in-depth study based on a range of specific indicators. These include, among other things, stakeholder perceptions, reputation indices, distinctions, or awards obtained, as well as environmental, social, and governance parameters. As illustrated in the summary table below, these elements provide a comprehensive and nuanced view of how the company is perceived. In addition, it is crucial to take into account indicators related to the acceptability of projects. These measures are based directly on the concerns expressed by stakeholders. The assessment can be approached from two distinct angles: from a quantitative perspective, it evaluates the overall level of acceptance, the interest generated by economic benefits such as job creation, and the perception of any associated risks; as well as from a qualitative perspective, it examines stakeholder's perception, the company's reputation and brand, consistency between discourse and actions, a responsible corporate culture, social innovation, and the strengthening of trust. These two angles of analysis are essential for obtaining a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the company's brand image.

To complete the analysis, we include an in-depth assessment of perceived value, asking whether the socio-economic benefits generated outweigh or offset any negative impacts. In doing so, the selection of criteria to be examined must be carefully tailored to the objectives of the study and the chosen scope of analysis, whether it concerns the company's product or a given geographical area. This methodology helps to ensure transparent and objective communication of the results obtained. However, it is essential to recognize certain limitations inherent in this approach. The qualitative variables used may be influenced by the behavior of the respondents. For example, a reluctance to speak freely or a requirement for anonymity can sometimes hinder the collection of reliable information and affect the accuracy of the conclusions. Therefore, as in any research, it is necessary to take into account the existence of reasonable margins of error related to these methodological constraints. Despite these limitations, the results remain highly relevant and make a significant contribution to understanding Lafarge's brand image.

Table 2. Process for evaluating the brand image of a globalized company

Measurement indicators		Assessment criteria	
Brand image assessment	Indicator 1: CSR (qualitative and quantitative criteria)*	Environmental pillar	Social pillar Economic/ governance pillar
	Indicator 2: CD	Communication strategy	Alignment of actions and discourse
	Indicator 3: Perception and impact	Stakeholder perception (reputation and acceptability of projects)	Brand image performance and credibility

* Quantitative criteria (CO2 emissions, recycled waste, employee productivity, etc.) and qualitative criteria (customer satisfaction, employee engagement and involvement, stakeholder perception, etc.)

Source: prepared by the author.

Empirical study: case of the Lafarge-Algeria Company

Before moving on to discuss, as is the objective of this article, certain diplomatic initiatives and achievements at the socio-economic and environmental levels at Lafarge, as well as their impact on the company’s image (competitiveness and acceptability of projects), we believe it is very useful to first understand how the concepts of CSR, corporate value (corporate identity), and communication are perceived by stakeholders.

Definition of CSR, corporate value and diplomatic communication

Definition of CSR

According to the results of our survey, we observe that managers perceive CSR as a set of social and environmental activities offered by the company to the local community. For them, CSR toward stakeholders consists of seeking to maximize profits and additional financial income in proportion to the volume of investment in social responsibility. Employees, on the other hand, see the need to consider employee capabilities and social conditions by offering them bonuses, rewards, and training. When it comes to the projects assigned to them, they state that it is the company's obligation to take quality and innovation into account by complying with standards and taking responsibility from production to product marketing. On the environmental side, they assert that it is mandatory for the company to dispose of existing waste on its sites, otherwise their work becomes incomplete and of poor quality.

Furthermore, with regard to CSR, we observe that the majority of executives interviewed see CSR as an opportunity that allows Lafarge to take socially responsible actions and to build closer ties with the community, thereby improving its image and legitimacy in the eyes of its partners and potential competitors. Meanwhile, the rest of those interviewed see CSR as much as a conviction, considering it a communication focus as well as a constraint.

Regarding the focus of CSR, the survey shows that the highest frequency is for environmental issues (50%), followed by human issues (35%), and finally economic issues with a frequency of 15%.

Finally, the main interests of CSR can be classified as follows: improving the value of the company, increasing turnover, attracting customers, attracting the best talent, and improving corporate communication. Moreover, the majority of the respondents confirm the implementation of ISO 26000 and ISO 14001 procedures.

Company values

The survey revealed that, among Lafarge’s main corporate values, people are often the most important, followed by quality and compliance, ethics and transparency, long-term vision, innovation and leadership, and commitment.

(Diplomatic) communication between the company and its stakeholders

From our literature review, we can see that Lafarge takes into consideration the principles and core issues of ISO 26000 and ISO 14 001, as well as the adaptation of these operational objectives in the areas of CSR. As shown in Table 3 below, the company feels concerned by:

Table 3. Key principles and issues for Lafarge from a stakeholder perspective

Stakeholders	CSR Objectives
Employees	Labor relations and working conditions; Freedom of association and bargaining rights; Guaranteeing non-discrimination and a gender approach
Customers and consumers	Product safety; Right to consumer information
Professional community and value chain	Developing practices and lobbying for the development of CSR best practices; Influencing the product value chain
Environment	Discharges and waste; Packaging recycling; Financing green projects
Local community	Youth and education

Source: compiled by the author from the survey.

Unquestionably, Lafarge’s Algerian managers, imbued in particular with diplomatic approaches, have won the trust of management by adopting more or less intuitively the same attitude (headquarters) toward other stakeholders. In terms of personal and professional commitment, they focus on staff motivation and mobilization, and on internal and external communication. In terms of communication, Lafarge communicates with all its stakeholders, which is an important act of diplomacy on its part (social and environmental reporting, CSR results, etc.).

Internally, the company communicates with its internal stakeholders using information technology and paper posters, and regularly issues reports. Externally, by way of example, on Wednesday, April 04, 2018, Lafarge organized an “Open Day” exclusively dedicated to informing and raising the awareness of civil society on the theme of the environment, associating their activities and structuring projects in progress, bearing the label “preservation of the environment and CD”.

On Tuesday April 12, 2016 at the Hotel El Aurassi in Algiers, it also organized the 12th edition of the technical seminar on construction under the theme “Building locally, Building sustainably”, dedicated to the presentation of new construction techniques and processes using local building materials, solutions that are more environmentally friendly, more economical, more sustainable, more aesthetically pleasing while favoring the use of locally available materials.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned initiatives to involve stakeholders, according to many of those interviewed, certain decisions or operations are carried out without the knowledge of the players concerned (unilateral decisions), in addition to the fact that certain factors (private and personal) are not taken into consideration in the staff motivation system, and that there is an absence of institutional communication on the results and actions of subsidiaries toward local people. However, it must be emphasized that Lafarge managers often have no difficulty in presenting their ideas and communicating their vision of the company’s development to their teams or other interested parties. We can therefore confirm that communication is an important lever of governance and motivation.

Concrete manifestations of socially responsible actions, achievements and diplomatic management

In terms of relations/relationships between the company and its stakeholders, CD as part of a CSR approach can be achieved by providing the local staff with room to maneuver, both in their decision-making processes and management practices, and in the operationalization of decisions. Such an approach is based, on the one hand, on trust in local players (managers, employees, etc.) and their skills and, on the other hand, on respect for the economic, social and cultural

context that they know well and know how to exploit to the benefit of the company's efficient operation in Algeria.

Overall, in our case study, the results of Lafarge's diplomatic management can be seen in the company's identity, motivation policy (management), communication policy and its commitment to CSR. But it's worth mentioning that it's on this last point that our analysis is centered, as is the title of this article, which basically aimed to analyze the CSR approach as an important lever serving the company's development and image.

In what follows, we will first highlight the company's main socio-economic and environmental actions and achievements, and then outline their contribution to improving the image, competitiveness and acceptance of Lafarge projects in Algeria.

Lafarge's CSR actions

Aware that any industrial activity can have an impact on the environment, Lafarge Algeria is committed to taking charge of aspects linked to the rehabilitation of industrial sites, in accordance with the provisions of the Algerian mining law (Law 01-10 of 03/07/2001) and its own commitments in terms of SD.

To this end, Lafarge Algeria relies on the Group's international standards. Environmental impact and management studies are carried out for all quarries currently in operation. As soon as they are opened, they have a redevelopment plan integrated into the operating plan, which includes environmental protection (preservation of biodiversity, water, soil and landscape) and taking into account the views of stakeholders (local authorities, environmental agencies, etc.). To this end, partnerships and agreements have been signed with a number of partners⁶.

6 Lafarge Algeria has signed a partnership agreement with the Tosyali Algeria group to recycle metallurgical industry waste in Lafarge's cement production process in Oggaz, through a sustainable development and natural resource conservation approach, in line with their environmental and social values. Since its creation, the cement plant has placed SD at the heart of its activities (ISO 26000).

Environmental responsibility at the service of corporate identity

In addition to environmental protection actions, Lafarge's responsible behavior toward civil society is another component of its identity. Since the beginning of the third millennium, the concept of CSR has been the subject of much interest in the literature, and many companies are beginning to adopt it.

It goes without saying that Lafarge Algeria's adherence to the CSR concept would inevitably contribute to reinforcing its identity and values. This can be seen on both the parent company's website and that of its Algerian subsidiary. In this way the company's managers always set out to support the most appropriate activities from the point of view of the needs of its stakeholders (employees, customers, etc.).

Looking at the three pillars of CSR, we can see that Lafarge's environmental pillar is directly linked to its business activities. The company invests heavily in energy-efficient technologies and innovation, and contributes to the development of the circular economy. Lafarge's cement plant (Oggaz) is the first in Algeria to adopt a circular economy approach through the treatment and recovery of industrial residues (recycling). In 2015, an initial "Geochute" investment was launched to process expired pharmaceutical products and other packaged waste, such as chemicals, and to recover sludge from dams for use in cement production as a substitute for natural materials⁷.

On a social level, Lafarge seeks to reduce the monotony of certain jobs through job rotation, job sharing, and efforts to balance employees' personal

⁷ The National Center for Cleaner Production Technologies and Lafarge Algeria have signed a scientific and technical cooperation agreement as part of an SD initiative. Lafarge Algeria has been working for several years to adapt the Holcim Group's green growth strategy in Algeria. This includes the launch (in 2019) of CHAMIL™ ECOPlanet cement, the first green cement in Algeria, which offers the same performance but with a 40% lower carbon footprint than conventional cement, thanks to innovative industrial processes and the preservation of local resources. These initiatives also include the renewal of a new fleet with newer, less polluting trucks and the launch of studies to develop solar energy at its sites (Algerieinvest, 2020).

and professional lives. It is also committed to investing in human resources and transferring know-how through a range of practical training courses⁸, partnerships with various universities⁹, intensive training programs for its employees in Algeria and abroad, as well as developing first-class health and safety¹⁰ conditions for its employees and those who interact with its activities, and promoting local economic development around the sites where it operates. Lafarge Algeria employs more than 2,600 people and is committed to developing civic initiatives for its communities. It also has more than 3,000 subcontractors.

These examples of CSR further confirm that in order to improve the company's image and identity, particularly among stakeholders, it is important to remember that each party has a role to perform in developing mutually beneficial relationships.

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- 8 For example, the agreement signed between ANGEM and Lafarge (2014) aimed to train young artisans benefiting from the National agency of the management of microcredit (ANGEM) program in the application of decorative concrete at Lafarge Algeria's Applied Research Laboratory (CDL Rouïba), encouraging the creation of micro-enterprises specializing in the application of innovative concrete and products, and integrating these micro-enterprises into a network of applicators, subcontractors, and partners of Lafarge Algeria.
 - 9 For example, Lafarge Algeria and University of science and Technology of Oran (USTO) are launching a specialized master's degree program entitled "Manufacturing and Quality Control of Construction Materials". This two-year specialized program is part of the Academic Partnership Agreement signed at the end of 2011 by Lafarge Algeria and USTO, under which Lafarge has already welcomed students from various programs to its concrete plants, cement factories, and offices for discovery visits and internships. Under this agreement, Lafarge has also sponsored national and international seminars and attracted experts who have regularly given lectures at universities that have benefited from Academic Partnership agreements.
 - 10 In the area of health and safety, Lafarge organized the first conference on road safety (the objectives and rules of Health & Safety at LafargeHolcim Algeria, with workshops on topics such as driver training and behavior, load management, and vehicle equipment).

Involving local stakeholders in investment decisions and implementation strengthens the company's identity and image

With regard to perceptions of Lafarge's identity, a sense of belonging to a company with its own culture, values, and reputation was clearly evident during the interviews. The company's identity is well known to stakeholders (managers, employees, civil society, local officials, etc.). It is perceived not only through its status as a global company (logo) but above all through its business activities (socially responsible), technologies, technical processes and constantly evolving expertise. A sense of pride (and even confidence) was identified among the interviewees. In any case, the corporate identity lends credibility to its products and services, creates links among stakeholders (employees, customers), and leaves its mark on the reputation of Lafarge Algeria.

Admittedly, as it is a large, globally known company, its identity preceded its arrival in Algeria (through its history, culture, and principles). However, if this identity (reputation) was not constantly reinforced by the involvement of local actors in the decision-making process and the operationalization of activities within the company operating in Algeria, it would not remain so present in the minds of the various stakeholders (positioning). Lafarge Algeria's identity bears the mark of diplomacy because it is presented by the parent company and perceived by stakeholders more as an opportunity than as an imperative or a necessity to be respected.

CSR promoting competitiveness and business development

A company operating in a given territory that does not take its social and environmental responsibilities seriously may find its development seriously hampered (which can damage its reputation).

CSR is included in the annual reports required by shareholders and investors. It is generally accepted that CSR contributes, on the one hand, to improving competitiveness and, on the other hand, to the acceptability of certain projects. This is what we observed in the company studied during our interviews and in our documentary analysis.

Improving Lafarge's competitiveness in the Algerian market

In order to be competitive and stand out from its competitors, a company must highlight its CSR actions. CSR contributes to improving its overall performance, to concrete improvements in innovation, and to strengthening its attractiveness.

That being said, as our survey shows, in terms of Lafarge's performance, its SD commitments were not only positive in terms of the production process (water and energy savings), but also in the long term, in terms of taking into account relationships with stakeholders and protecting and preserving the environment in which the company operates.

In terms of innovation, although environmental and social aspects are most often seen as costs (constraints) by Lafarge, this has nonetheless led the company to innovate in many cases (adapting its production lines to a highly energy- and water-efficient model; repositioning its products on greener lines; complying with social and environmental standards; using advanced technologies (digitization of personnel, etc.). These are all initiatives and commitments that have led to further innovation and adaptation to new societal and environmental challenges.

In terms of attractiveness, it should be noted that, according to those interviewed, Lafarge's CSR strategy has made it highly visible and attractive to external stakeholders (by retaining employees who value their work, as well as to its customers and other local players who place greater trust in Lafarge, especially as a socially responsible company).

CSR, a lever for the acceptability of company projects

CSR is not only a factor in competitiveness, it is also a means of making certain projects, which would otherwise have been controversial, acceptable. This is the case for the company we studied, which is committed to developing a social environment in the areas where it operates, by building gardens and supporting local associations. This was a real lever for reassuring local stakeholders (civil society) and involving them, or even associating them, with infrastructure investment projects that could have been a danger to the environment (reducing dust

emissions, preserving fossil and non-renewable natural resources through substitutes derived from waste and/or industrial residues, and local waste recovery).

It should also be emphasized that taking social and environmental issues into account (in addition to job creation and economic growth) is an important factor in winning projects by gaining the support of local stakeholders, who are now extremely well informed and well organized (associations, NGOs, etc.). Lafarge Algeria's product is also attractive and highly prized for its quality, durability, and environmental friendliness. We can therefore confirm based on the above conclusions, the main hypothesis of this study: CSR enhances the legitimacy, competitiveness, and acceptability of projects, functioning as a diplomatic tool capable of aligning local interests with the strategy of Lafarge Algeria. Therefore, it can be argued that CSR, as an important component of CD, is a significant lever for the brand image of the company studied, namely "Lafarge-Algeria".

CSR is intrinsically tied to globalization and serves as a formidable instrument for MNC, which often command resources comparable to or even surpassing those of national governments. As companies deepen their understanding of CSR and implement its components more effectively, they develop enhanced mechanisms for identifying, measuring, evaluating, and managing the impacts of their operations. In this context, the SD objectives exemplify the diplomatic and strategic dimensions of CSR. It can be inferred that Lafarge-Algeria aligns its initiatives with the SD goals to guide its commitments. For instance, the company has established a fund to provide health coverage for its employees, advancing the realization of target 3.8. Similarly, it has increased internship opportunities to address youth unemployment and meet the objectives of goal 8.6. Additionally, efforts to create more green spaces around their facilities reflect a contribution toward achieving goal 11.7.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the link between the adoption of a CSR approach, diplomatic practices, and the brand image of globalized companies. More

specifically, it sought to examine the impact of CSR policy on strengthening the brand image of globalized companies operating in the non-hydrocarbon production sector in Algeria (the mining industry). In doing so, conceptual and theoretical aspects were integrated into an empirical analysis (case study of Lafarge-Algeria) based on a sample of 43 participants. The research provided several key conclusions:

We observe that Lafarge Algeria's commitment, like that of certain multinational companies (particularly in the oil sector) in Algeria, to adopting CSR principles is based on the principles and guidelines of the United Nations SD's objectives. We observe that this has enabled the company to improve its image and reputation among its various stakeholders at the local and national levels. It is clear that, in order to ensure the success of its CSR approach, the company often combines social and environmental dimensions with its activities, such as improving working conditions, ensuring health and safety, and engaging in dialogue with stakeholders to promote local and SD. In the area of ethics, training for all staff has helped to strengthen their sense of belonging (corporate identity and values) and provides meaning to what they do. Lafarge continues to develop a clear corporate communications policy (towards stakeholders) that incorporates a CSR policy enabling them to maintain a positive brand image.

We conclude that Lafarge Algeria's adoption of a CSR approach is an important lever for its development and performance improvement and for facing its local competitors (competitiveness and project acceptability), especially since the company is already well positioned thanks to its international reputation and competitive advantage. CSR even functions as a diplomatic tool capable of aligning local interests with corporate strategy. We conclude that CSR is an important component of Lafarge Algeria's diplomacy (better image, improved performance, and a significant role in addressing the country's SD challenges). Consequently, all of this confirms our main hypothesis, which posits CSR as an important lever for enhancing the brand image of multinational companies (MNC).

Practically, although our study was based on the interview method and used some of its techniques, we must admit that we would have liked to supplement it with participant observation. However, this approach would have been difficult to implement for several reasons. It is not easy for a researcher to gain access to

all departments within a company, as some prefer to avoid becoming the subject of study. However, this step remains essential in order to enrich and deepen the analysis. In addition, we often encountered difficulties in approaching senior executives, due to their unavailability or personal constraints; some even declined to participate altogether. This is why we believe that future research would benefit from further developing this dimension. The absence of participant observation could, in our case, negatively affect the scope of the results, insofar as our analysis could not be limited solely to the opinions gathered from participants. However, it is essential for researchers to immerse themselves in the company's various departments, as well as in trade unions and citizen associations: talking to managers (in particular the head office), trade unionists, and suppliers, but also observing the daily lives of staff, would provide a better understanding of their involvement, particularly in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, despite these limitations and shortcomings, our study highlights compelling and useful results for assessing the impact of CSR on the image of globalized companies operating in the mining sector, particularly through the prism of developing economies and the intersection of CSR policy and corporate diplomacy.

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