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The role of Corporate Social Responsibility in Organisational Identity

Communication, Co-Creation and Orientation

M. Karim Sorour, Mark Boadou, Teerooven Soobaroyen

Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) research has mainly focused on understanding the antecedents and outcomes of CSR adoption. Yet, little is known about the organisational process of ‘CSR engagement’ and how this would affect organisational identity. We mobilise Basu and Palazzo’s cognitive and linguistic notions of sense-making and Brickson’s organisational identity orientation to frame how rural and community banks (RCBs) in Ghana engage with CSR. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with RCB directors, managers and other stakeholders, we conceive the CSR engagement process as one that allows for the communication and orientation of organisational identity through an ‘informal co-creation’ involving organisational actors and stakeholders. Our findings also emphasise the ‘cultural/political’ modes of justification put forward by RCBs in their CSR engagement. Lastly, we tentatively propose the notion of an ‘opaque context’ to highlight settings that are less concerned about public visibility (i.e. transparency and disclosure), and where the focus is instead on the direct interactions between organisations and stakeholders in a given social context.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility; organisational identity; Sense-making

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Introduction

To date, a large body of work has been undertaken to ascertain the nature, consequences and implications of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, from institutional, organisational and/or individual perspectives (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Athanasopoulou and Selsky, 2015). However, relatively less is known about the interaction between CSR and organisational identity (Atakan and Eker, 2007; Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Bravo, Matute and Pina, 2012). For example, CSR communication (e.g. formal reporting) is typically viewed as a representation of organisational identity (e.g. Perez et al. 2012; Bravo et al. 2012) but there has been little consideration of how CSR activities (rather than mere disclosure) interplay with organisational identity. Organisational identity generally “informs how businesses relate to stakeholders and why they relate to them as they do” (Brickson, 2007, p.13), and can be seen as “a mechanism that mediates between external pressures and internal demands of continuity” (Kirchner, 2010, p. 3). As such, a CSR activity may be decided as a result of a cognitive process by directors/managers, in accordance with a shared perception constitutive of the organisation’s identity (Basu and Palazzo, 2008) and in the way organisations justify their CSR approach to others (legal, scientific and economic). Arguably, this is a different perspective to the one being so far investigated in the literature (Lauring and Thomsen, 2009; Bravo et al., 2012; Pérez and del Bosque, 2012; Fatma and Rahman, 2014).

Furthermore, of particular note has been the question of how CSR ‘operates’ in non-Western developing countries where notions of ‘private’ sector, ‘civil’ society, ‘stakeholders’ and ‘transparency’ are not always clearly delineated (Jamali, 2014; Jamali, Karam, Yin and Soundarajan, 2017; Miska, Witt and Stahl, 2016; Davila et al., 2018). The extant literature in these contexts (e.g. Adanhounme, 2011; Amaeshi, 2011; Drebes, 2014; Jamali, 2014; Jamali, Lund-Thomsen and Jeppesen, 2015; Khan and Lund-Thomsen, 2011) has tended to highlight

the Western-centric, globalising or post-colonial origins, assumptions and construction of ‘CSR’. In particular, how local businesses and social settings interact with CSR activities, strategies and discourses, primarily to seek legitimacy from external audiences for instrumental gains (Chung et al, 2013; Jamali, 2014; Miska et al., 2016). Other commentators suggest that CSR has been ‘appropriated’ to address or reflect local socio-political imperatives (Smith, 2011). Jamali et al., (2017) also make a compelling case for a multiplicity of logics which underlie the translation and adaptation of CSR in developing countries, especially when taking into consideration a unique set of challenges such as corruption and weak legal enforcement (Amaeshi et al., 2016; Chakrabarty, 2009; Khanna and Palepu, 2010). More generally, however, there is a view that the context in which CSR practices unfold - whether ‘context’ is conceptualised from a cognitive, cultural and/or institutional perspective - needs to be emphasised to improve one’s understanding of the organisational reality of CSR (Athanasopoulou and Selsky, 2015, p. 351).

In light of the above, we mobilise Basu and Palazzo’s (2008) model of sense-making and Brickson’s (2007) notion of ‘organisational identity orientation’ to provide a nuanced analysis of CSR activities, the underlying motivations for CSR engagement, and its influence on organisational identity in a developing country. We also address a contextual issue by proposing the notion of ‘opaque context’, which we define as a setting where public displays and/or dissemination of CSR accountability and reporting are fairly absent (Belal and Cooper, 2011)¹ and where it would be difficult to engage with existing notions of communicated identity (e.g. Bravo et al, 2012). Instead, direct forms of engagement with stakeholders, that

¹ However, we do not claim that an ‘opaque’ context is a characteristic of all developing countries (or that all developed countries are, by opposition, not opaque). Instead, we argue that there are national or sub-national settings (e.g. sectoral, regional) where the use and reliance on publicly disclosed reports are not prevalent. In the accounting literature, Belal and Cooper (2011) already highlighted that the absence of CSR reporting may be due to a lack of organisational resources, absence of legal requirements, lack of knowledge/awareness, poor performance and fear of bad publicity. Our proposed conception of ‘opaque context’ dovetails this work to emphasise settings where transparency and disclosure mechanisms would be inappropriate given the primacy of direct interactions between organisation and stakeholders.

are not readily observable in public reports, prevail and reflect a ‘private’ mechanism of stakeholder accountability, dovetailing extant research work on mechanisms of stakeholder engagement (Davila et al., 2018). Arguably, this point has not been sufficiently emphasised in the literature (e.g. Basu and Palazzo’s view on balanced vs. biased transparency).

Our empirical material is drawn from the case of rural and community banks (RCBs) in Ghana, that are expected to provide financial services to the rural community and support “community development” (Nair and Fisha, 2010, p. 12). Rural areas in Ghana have been experiencing persistent levels of under-development, with over 45% of Ghanaians residing in rural areas and over 39% living below the poverty line (Ghana Statistical Service, 2018). The lack of access to financial institutions meant that rural communities (particularly farmers, artisans and traders) could only rely on moneylenders, who tend to charge extortionate interest rates (Mensah et al., 2015). This led the government to introduce the RCB in the late 1970s to provide institutional credit to farmers to improve the standard of living and to facilitate development in rural areas (Mensah et al., 2015; Obeng, 2008).

The ‘locational’ peculiarity of the RCB (Nair and Fisha, 2010), namely its key role in a rural/agricultural contexts and with very few formal businesses operating in the region, and its historical mandate to support rural development have motivated our interest in this so-called ‘opaque’ setting. Financial services in Ghana (CIA World Factbook, 2010) face a rather competitive environment, which makes it a challenge for RCBs not just to be profitable, but also to embark on strategies to engage stakeholders and undertake social actions. There has been so far very limited explanation of how RCBs engage with CSR within this context. There is also little evidence that authorities could ‘compel’ RCBs in engaging with CSR and nor is there publicly available information which would enable stakeholders to ‘pressure’ RCBs to act accordingly. We therefore ask, *how do RCBs integrate CSR into their activities and if so,*

how does CSR engagement contribute to the organisation's identity vis-à-vis its stakeholders in a so-called 'opaque' environment (i.e. in the absence of publicly available information)?

We seek to answer these questions by undertaking an interpretive study based on twenty semi-structured interviews with board of directors/managers, customers, regulator, community leaders and beneficiaries associated with nine RCBs. Our findings and contributions are threefold, in terms of (i) revealing how the sense-making process between internal and external stakeholders contributes to organisational identity through identity co-creation, (ii) emphasising the role of political/justifications in CSR decisions, and (iii) highlighting the possible dynamics that arise when CSR operates without in a context where public.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows: the next section briefly reviews extant studies on organisational identity and CSR, which is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework of the study. Next, the research methods are presented, followed by findings and analysis. Finally, the conclusion, limitations and avenues for future research are outlined.

Literature Review

An overview of CSR and organisational identity

Typically, the term 'organisational identity' raises the following questions: "Who are we? What kind of business are we in? And what do we want to be?" (Albert and Whetten, 1985, p. 90). These are self-reflective questions which refer to the "features that distinguish the organization from others with which it may be compared to ... (or) features that exhibit some degree of sameness or continuity overtime" (Albert and Whetten, 1985, p. 71). Whilst the concept of organisational identity can be understood in different ways (Bravo, et al., 2012), one common conception is that organisational identity embraces a set of *central, enduring* and *distinctive* features that are embedded within the organisation and recognised by its formal members e.g. employees, managers, shareholders (Albert and Whetten, 1985). This crucial

element of embeddedness can be manifested in terms of corporate behaviour (including CSR), culture and philosophy (Melewar and Akeel, 2005; Simões, Dibb and Fisk, 2005).

This approach to organisational identity is often referred to as an essentialist one (Özen and Küskü, 2008) in that identity is created by individuals within the organisation. Managers, for instance, make decisions about the role of CSR on the basis of their perception of how social responsibility is crucial to an organisation's identity (Perez et al., 2012). However, there is also a structuralist notion of organisational identity in that it can be shaped (or maintained) by individuals' interactions within a social context (Özen and Küskü, 2008). Organisational identity can be seen as a social construct arising from an interactive process between an organisation and society (Czarniawksa and Wolf, 1998; Özen and Küskü, 2008). In this regard, and whilst not seeking to marginalise the perceptions of internal actors (staff, managers), we contend that the structuralist notion recognises more explicitly the role of external stakeholders and the relations they maintain with the organisation. Organisational identity, thus contributes to the positioning of the organisation within society, and in the minds of stakeholders, as a desired and legitimate entity (Balmer, 2001; Bravo et al., 2012).

Several authors specifically highlight the role of CSR in relation to organisational identity. For example, Perez et al. (2012) noted that savings banks paid more attention to CSR when defining their identity compared to mainstream banks, albeit that savings bank managers remained sceptical about the effectiveness of CSR reports in the communication of organisational identity to the relevant stakeholders. In a similar vein, Bravo et al.'s (2012) analysis of online CSR reporting showed that Spanish banks privilege the provision of 'communicated identity', which was largely at odds with actual corporate identity e.g. CSR disclosures about the banks' stated social or ethical principles did not explicitly appear in their mission or vision statements. Instead, customer centric activities in banking appeared more often in CSR disclosures and has been associated to an instrumental motive of making

customers feel involved and hence satisfied. Whilst these empirical studies do allude to an interplay between CSR and organisational identity, there has very little in the way of a theoretically informed analysis of this interaction involving managers, external stakeholders and society more generally (Brickson, 2007; Skilton and Purdy, 2017).

A notable gap in the literature exists in relation to how organisations make sense of their world and engage with stakeholders (Basu and Palazzo, 2008) in contexts where public displays (e.g. CSR reports) are not so prevalent e.g. smaller unlisted firms, rural development entities and local non-government organisations. Contrastingly, much has been said on the drivers and outcomes of CSR in developing countries (Jamali and Karam, 2016), primarily from empirical studies of large private companies operating in manufacturing settings and in relation to labour-related matters. Several key drivers have been put forward, namely geopolitical factors (Adegbite and Nakajama, 2011; Jamali and Sidani, 2011), societal governance (Jamali and Neville, 2011), weak or absent institutional settings (Amaeshi, Adegbite and Rajwani, 2016; Boudier and Bensebaa, 2011), the role of multinational companies and supra-national bodies in the dissemination of ‘foreign’ practices (Amaeshi, 2011; Beckman, Colwell and Cunningham, 2009; Miska et al., 2016), the role of culture (Goby and Nickerson, 2015; 2014; Kim and Kim, 2008; Rees and Miazhevich, 2008) and colonial/post-colonial influences (Adanhounme, 2011; Khan and Lund-Thomsen, 2011). Hence, what we seek to contribute to the literature is how CSR engagement is involved in an interaction process between the internal and external worlds of an organisation, and how does organisational identity become a “mechanism which mediates between external pressures and internal demands of continuity” (Kirchner, 2010, p. 3; Athanasopoulou and Selsky, 2015). This question brings us to the work by Basu and Palazzo (2008) and Brickson (2007).

The interplay between CSR and organisational identity: theoretical considerations

For Basu and Palazzo (2008), mainstream CSR research tends to focus on substantive CSR activities and their drivers, but less in terms of what are their “precipitating causes” (Basu and Palazzo, 2008, p. 4). They conceive CSR as a part of the organisation’s sense making of the world in terms of:

“The process by which managers within an organisation think about and discuss relationships to stakeholders as well as their roles in relation to the common good, along with their behavioural disposition with respect to the fulfilment and achievement of these” (2008, p. 9).

More specifically, Basu and Palazzo (2008) articulate a framework whose primary concern is the development of one’s understanding of how individuals *think of, speak about and initiate (or intend) action* in relation to CSR. According to the authors, CSR activities do not typically emanate from the organisation’s external stakeholders (expectations or wishes) but rather emerge from internally embedded cognitive and linguistic processes. This process of sense-making originates from the mental frames/models organisational leaders rely upon to articulate how the organisation will relate to its stakeholders and respond to demands. This approach enables researchers to theorise CSR as a part of the organisation’s ‘character’ rather than merely analyse the ‘content’ of CSR practices reported over time. Basu and Palazzo (2008) contend that the CSR sense-making process involves a deeper analysis of practices and perspectives within three broad domains (cognitive, linguistic and conative), and respectively, along two cognitive dimensions (*identity orientation and legitimacy*), two linguistic dimensions (*modes of justifications and transparency*) and three conative dimensions (*consistency, commitment and posture*). Given the intended focus of the study on the interplay between CSR and organisational identity, our empirical analysis will be on the cognitive and linguistic dimensions, namely *identity orientation, legitimacy, modes of justification and transparency*, which we outline in more detail below:

Firstly, drawing from Brickson (2007), ‘organisational identity orientation’ refers to the “*assumed nature of association between an organization and stakeholders as perceived by members*” (p. 866). In line with the structuralist notions of organisational identity, the interactions between stakeholders (internal and external) and organisation are crucial in the formation of a shared organisational identity. There are three forms of identity orientation: individualistic, relational and collectivistic. First, an individualistic orientation favours organisational self-interest (e.g. profitability, market share, commercial reputation) whereby CSR actions take the form of ‘selling’ points to distinguish the organisation from others, but with little consideration of the maintaining of sustainable ties with stakeholders. Hence, relationships/engagement activities are managed on an instrumental, arm’s length basis and are potentially fickle. Contrastingly, a relational organisation emphasises the development of strong and trusting relationship with particular stakeholders, characterised “by a high frequency of interaction, reciprocity, emotional intensity and intimacy” (Brickson, 2007, p. 871). The creation and maintenance of deeper stakeholder relationships is seen here as an end in itself and is a reflection of a genuine concern, albeit generally focused on one or few key stakeholders. Lastly, collectivistic organisations share a common goal with a larger constituency of stakeholders (community) and rather than consider the latter merely as a means to an end or by focusing on few salient stakeholder, organisations instead operate towards the improvement of collective welfare.

Brickson (2007, p. 868) points out that a relational or collectivist orientation does not imply a self-sacrificial move by for-profit companies. In effect, all organisations, even so-called ‘non-profit’ ones, need to engage in some form of calculation (referred to as a ‘hedonic calculus’) to balance competing goals and ensure survival. Arguably, therefore, engaging in CSR does lead to or imply a ‘business case’ evaluation. Crucially, however, this evaluation is not exclusively based on self-interested, short-term rationales, but potentially on longer-term

ones benefits that would be of mutual benefit to the organisation, stakeholders and society. In this regard, it is possible to consider an organisation's CSR strategy, activities, and discourses as a reflection of the interactions between the organisation and its stakeholders, which in turn contributes to the positioning of an organisation's identity orientation.

The second cognitive dimension (legitimacy) relates to the perception that the organisation is operating in a desirable and appropriate way that is consistent with a broader system of norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). In turn, legitimation is the process and/or mechanism by which the organisation can gain, maintain, or repair its legitimacy. The organisation can adopt a strategic perspective in the 'management' of its legitimacy (as for any other resource) whereby it seeks to convince an external audience of the importance of its operations, products and processes. Suchman (1995) refers to different types of legitimacy that are amenable to managerial control and discretion. In particular, *pragmatic legitimacy* rests on the organisation's ability to satisfy the self-interested demands of its close audiences, typically by providing a direct benefit or resource (e.g. donations). Contrastingly, *moral legitimacy* arises from an organisation's judgement that a process or practice is the 'right thing to do' (1995, p. 579) and not primarily because it serves the instrumental needs of specific audiences. In this respect, if the organisation is able to deliver on its mandate and/or adopt appropriate procedures and structures, then it would be perceived as a legitimate entity. In conclusion, Basu and Palazzo (2008) identify identity orientation and legitimacy as key planks of the cognitive phase whereby managers conceive the organisation's relationships with stakeholders and think about CSR actions.

The next dimension broadly relates to the 'communicating' and 'linguistic' processes of the organisation as it engages with its stakeholders. 'Communicating' does not necessarily relate to the use of formal mechanisms of public disclosure, such as annual reports but also incorporates direct engagement. Basu and Palazzo (2008) highlight the fact that justifications

put forward to engage with CSR may allow for an understanding of why organisations engage in particular ways with different actors and with society in general. Furthermore, the authors argue that an analysis of such justifications refers to the use of a ‘language game’ that can characterise how an organisation filters perceptions of the external world, assesses conflicts and responds to the demands (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). The authors contend that there are variants of this language game which could be deployed in framing particular CSR interventions or policies, namely of a legal nature (e.g. the use of legal and quasi-legal concepts; conformity to legal rules), scientific reasoning (e.g. the use of independent expertise), and/or an economic justification (the use of calculative / financial practices e.g. cost-benefit analysis).

Whilst we acknowledge the above are mainstream rationales for underpinning CSR action, evidence from developing countries does point to the prominence or at least co-existence of the cultural, social and/or political modes of justification (Jamali et al., 2017; Uddin et al., 2018) in various studies of CSR practices. For instance, a recent study by Uddin et al. (2018) highlighted how features of traditional societies (personal or public displays of loyalty, master-servant relationships, obedience to personal rather than formal authority) are associated with the way CSR is practised and disclosed in Bangladesh, specifically in relation to the wishes of powerful corporate leaders and ruling political parties. CSR activities can be enacted for party-political reasons and to help secure acceptance from powerful elites. Relatedly, Jamali et al. (2017) highlights the prevalence of ‘state’, ‘family’ and ‘religion’ logics as examples of institutional orders that underpin the translation and adaptation of ‘mainstream CSR’ talk, policy and practices in the local context. Particularly in relation to family and religion logics, there are patterns of beliefs and obligations, which could underpin modes of justifications and language games.

In the African context, both Jamali et al. (2017) and Kolk and Rivera-Santos (2018) highlight for instance the role of tribal identities, clan ties and ‘chiefs’ in many regions, with

the latter often entrusted with the re-distribution of resources and opportunities in the local community. Acting as intermediaries, they can influence how CSR activities are implemented in a specific context. Lastly, various religious teachings and doctrines become translated into moral imperatives for individuals and organisations (e.g. businesses) to support the poor/needful or avoid so-called harmful activities/products. In summary, we contend that in addition to the ‘formal rational’ justifications put forward in Basu and Palazzo’s (2008) framework, there are a number of ‘substantive’ rationalities (historical, social, cultural, political and religious) an organisation and/or its actors/stakeholders can mobilise to motivate particular CSR efforts.

The role of transparency in the sense-making model

Basu and Palazzo (2008) highlight the role of transparency in the sense-making model and conceptualise it as “*elaborate reporting procedures that include both conventional media as well as the web*” (p. 16). In the main, the authors highlight the way CSR communication is publicised by the organisation and the alternative motivations for reporting information in a biased or balanced (neutral) form. There is a well-established literature on CSR reporting practices, which generally finds evidence of biased or politicised forms of reporting (e.g. Michelin et al., 2015; Soobaroyen and Mahadeo, 2016) and in turn, this contributes to a perception that CSR communication is no more than just a public relations exercise. In this regard, there have been attempts to foster the adoption of standardised models of CSR reporting (e.g. Global Reporting Initiative; Integrated Reporting) that would be amenable to comparative analysis, and whose target audience would mainly consist of an international and sophisticated audience of investors, donors, international organisations and customer representatives (Jamali et al., 2017).

However, we contend that Basu and Palazzo’s (2008) view is suggestive of a somewhat narrow conception of ‘transparency’ namely via the use of ‘market-inspired’ forms of public

disclosure and transparency. Akin to how publicly available information is seen to be crucial to the efficient functioning of capital markets, there has been an assumption that CSR reports would ‘prompt’ public/media reaction, which will in turn, bring to bear, stakeholder pressure, and eventually leading to an organisational response. Our view is that such a sequence of events is far less applicable to contexts where the provision of CSR information and institutional capacity for the supply of such reporting are not so prevalent. This would lead to observations that such contexts are ‘opaque’ from the perspective of an (independently observed) lack of information and convey a negative connotation that stakeholders are unable to press for action or a response from organisations.

Contrastingly however, we argue that there are particular regional or sectoral settings in any country that are inherently less reliant on these public transparency mechanisms - whereby more direct forms of communication with stakeholders are privileged and which would be less ‘visible’ from ‘outside’. For example, there has been very little documented in terms of the CSR reporting practices (if any) of unlisted firms or smaller firms (Jamali et al., 2015) in developing countries, but this does not imply that these businesses are not involved in CSR activities. Claims about a lack of transparency or of opaqueness are hence made without necessarily considering that other forms of direct communication and interaction might exist between some or all stakeholders and the organisation. It is this additional insight that we seek to highlight as part of the transparency dimensions that were initially proposed by Basu and Palazzo (2008). In other words, we suggest that opacity (or absence of transparency) is another dimension alongside biased and balanced forms of transparency.

In conclusion, and in light of a limited understanding of how (and to what extent) do CSR activities interplay with the maintaining or re-(shaping) of organisational identity, we theoretically frame our research questions in terms of how actors cognitively and linguistically conceive and engage with CSR activities of Ghanaian RCBs. By extension, how does this

contribute to the organisations' identity orientation, particularly in a context where there is little in the way of an engagement with public forms of CSR reporting i.e. an opaque setting?

Research Design and Methods

Data collection and case selection

The decision to undertake a qualitative study was motivated by the nature of the research problem whereby, little is known about the organisational process of 'CSR engagement' and how it would affect organisational identity. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with RCB directors, managers and other stakeholders, we investigated how rural and community banks (RCBs) in Ghana engage with CSR. In this case, it seemed appropriate to rely on a qualitative approach to uncover the nature of CSR activities and its link to organisational identity within the idiosyncratic setting of RCBs in Ghana (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 19). Here, a qualitative research approach seems well-suited to "uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.19). hence, the qualitative research adopted in this study has also allowed us to take into consideration the nuanced interactions between the RCBs organisational identity and the surrounding socio-cultural factors (Jamali and Karam, 2016), through talking to the individuals involved in the lived experience and interpreting their view points in relation to the phenomenon investigated through QCA and the relevant theoretical lenses. To address our research questions on the interplay between CSR and organisational identity in the context of RCBs, we relied primarily on semi-structured interviews. This was facilitated by one of the co-authors from Ghana. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted, comprising of fourteen RCB senior managers and board directors from nine RCBs in the Eastern region of Ghana as well as six stakeholders, namely shareholders, regulators, customers, beneficiaries and community representatives. It is worth noting that these interviews took place in two stages: For stage one, there were fifteen interviews. Similar responses were noted from the

thirteenth interview and data collection ended at saturation after the fifteenth interview. Stage two included five semi-structured interviews to follow-up on the key coding outcomes from stage one.

The Eastern Region of Ghana was adopted for this study and RCBs in this region are amongst the most performing rural banks in Ghana and were better known to one of the authors. We considered a variety of relevant experiences from our list of key informants. To minimise bias by researchers, a team of three interviewers was used during the two interview stages, comprising of one of the authors and two assistants trained/recruited to support the data collection. The latter researchers were given an orientation before embarking upon the process.

The first stage of interviews was carried out between November 2016 and February 2017. The follow-up interviews (stage two) were conducted between July and September 2019. All interviews were carried out by native Ghanaians at the premises of the RCB's office, and this helped identify verbal and non-verbal (as well as contextual) cues during interviews. Interviews lasted for an average of 60 minutes and were all audio-recorded and transcribed. It is worth mentioning that, gaining access was quite challenging and as such, the research team was compelled to use the purposive sampling technique to select participants who were relevant to the research study and scope of the paper (i.e. CSR and the RCB's identity in Ghana) and who were willing to participate. This is congruent with the aim of purposive sampling, whereby it is not about achieving a so-called (statistically) 'representative' sample. Instead, "cases are chosen as it becomes clear that they can contribute to theory generation" (Harding, 2012, p. 132). Arguably, there are many challenges in accessing research participants in these settings, and regardless of the number of interviews, what really mattered was the participants' "knowledge and experience regarding a specific phenomenon" (Bagnasco, Ghirotto & Loredana, 2014, p. 6).

To maintain anonymity, all names of individuals and organisations included in the study are withheld. Tables 1 and 2 offer an overview of the participants' profile and profile of RCBs represented. Participants/ RCBs formal representatives were contacted by phone and upon agreeing to participate, an interview protocol sent to them highlighting the objective of the research and the discussion topics, which is shown in Appendix 1. The interview transcripts were sent to each interviewee to ensure that it is an appropriate representation of their opinions, thereby contributing to the authenticity of this research endeavour. Finally, copies of most recent annual accounts and/or financial statements for five RCBs were provided to us and this allowed us to consider what has been disclosed in these reports, particularly in terms of the stated organisational mission/vision and the CSR activities. We chose to maintain organisational anonymity by only referring to the RCB's serial number (e.g. RCB1, 2... RCB9) when referring in the paper to any formal disclosures.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Schreier, 2012), i.e. “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005 p. 1278). QCA helps researchers making sense of large amounts of data with a focus on “non-frequency indicators” (Schreier, 2012, p. 14), as opposed to the quantitative variant of content analysis (e.g. refer to Krippendorff, 2013). The focus of QCA is on “latent meaning” and as such, one needs to take the broader context into consideration while coding the data. Hence, QCA is different from quantitative content analysis with more variability in carrying out the steps compared to the strict sequence of steps under the quantitative version (Schreier, 2012).

There are key aspects that impacted on the coding process in this paper. First, codes or categories were part data-driven and part concept driven. This means that we have analysed the interviews to interpret the phenomenon under investigation whilst guided by our theoretical framework which combines Basu and Palazzo's (2008) CSR sense-making model alongside Brickson's (2007) thoughts on identity orientation to analyse how Ghanaian RCBs conceive, and engage with, CSR, and its stakeholders in the rural communities. From a QCA perspective, it is thus rare to 'code' purely on the basis of the theoretical constructs or data inspired ones and instead it is common practice to mix both strategies (Schreier, 2012; Früh, 2007) for the benefit of richer insights.

Second, we considered the interview as the unit of analysis for QCA, whereby content analysis is undertaken for each interview transcript. Units of coding can be interpreted in a meaningful way in relation to the conceptual or data-driven categories. There are many approaches to deriving these specific units of coding, with the one applied within this paper being the "thematic criterion" (Schreier, 2012, p. 136). In practice, this requires the authors to synthesise and interpret every interview in relation to the categories to see how every interview could contribute to give a fuller and contextual meaning of the categories identified (Schreier, 2012).

Third, some aspects regarding the data analysis that the initial analysis and coding was done after each interview, and this has informed further data collection, in terms of supplementing open questions with prompts that facilitated one's understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspective. The audio tape recordings were transcribed after every interview and shared between co-authors via a secured online platform. The coding was undertaken individually by the authors and then discussed to arrive at the outcome. In terms of reliability and specifically inter-coder reliability, it is difficult to have perfect agreement between three coders, in essence this promotes "diversity in researcher coding..."

(which) is a strength rather than a weakness. Insights gained through the discussions of disagreements can be a powerful aid to understanding the patterns emerging from the data” (Olson et al., 2016, p. 30, authors emphasis). Of note, the disagreement between coders lead to subsequent discussions and has contributed to getting to a shared understanding grounded in reality and hence minimising any ambiguity in the interpretation process. The outcome themes/ categories were thus the outcome agreed by the authors within this process. The analysis/coding process did not happen in a linear fashion, but required to-ing and fro-ing where the authors code, discuss and revisit the data moving back and forth (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This process helped to enhance validity through a triangulation of coding (Harris and Burke, 2011). Furthermore, a number of triangulation techniques were employed in this research such as using multiple sources of information about RCBs (managers, directors, and customers), using multiple data collectors (three were used), using three researchers for interpretation and coding and comparing incident. These strategies have contributed to offering a rich and reliable data about the phenomenon, enhancing the credibility of the description and theorisation endeavours.

RCBs background

This section will discuss the background of RCBs in relation to their CSR context and their respective organisational identity, before discussing the findings of the study.

The social and organisational context of Ghanaian RCBs

Ghana, similar to several African developing countries, suffers from low productivity, low-income levels, low domestic savings and unemployment. Agriculture remains one of Ghana’s most important sectors and its contribution amounts to over 30% of the Country’s Gross Domestic Product (The Budget Statement and Economic Policy of Government of

Ghana, 2016). In the past, various governments have initiated policies and programmes including: the promotion of employment opportunities in rural areas, stemming premature rural-urban migration meant to improve the standard of living in rural areas. However, these programmes and policies did not achieve significant success (Nair and Fisha, 2010; Obeng, 2008). Rural communities, whose dwellers are predominantly small farmers, traders and fishermen, were left to depend heavily on high interest loan facilities from moneylenders and traders (Mensah et al., 2015).

To address this pressing issue, the government introduced the rural banking concept in 1976 to provide institutional credit to farmers and other rural enterprises to improve the standard of living and to facilitate rural development (Mensah et al., 2015; Obeng, 2008). RCBs were incorporated as limited liability companies under the Companies Act, 1963 (Act 179) and regulated and supervised by the Bank of Ghana under the Banking (Amendment) Act 2007 (Act 738) and Bank of Ghana Act (2002), Act 612. Currently, there are over 160 RCBs with over 600 branches/agencies in the country (Association of Rural Banks, 2019), representing the largest banking network in Ghana and each operating within relatively small but rather exclusive catchment areas.

RCBs require local participation and investment, and are intended to be owned and managed by the communities within which they operate (Mensah et al., 2015) to mobilise and channel rural savings for economic development and the benefit of the local community (Asiedu-Mante, 2002). The rationale behind community ownership was to promote community identity, boost local patronage and support the processing of requests for facilities and loans (Bank of Ghana, 1997) and therefore its stated purpose very much focused on addressing the economic barriers to rural development. In addition, the Association of Rural Banks (ARB) Apex Bank provides financial, managerial and technical support to RCBs on behalf of the regulatory (financial) authority (Bank of Ghana). The ARB Apex Bank outlined a mix of

micro-finance and commercial banking products/services, aimed at satisfying the financial needs of the rural community. For example, RCBs focus on the provision of credit to cottage industry operators such as small farmers and fishermen.

Crucially, RCBs are expected to support development within their catchment areas, such as donations to fund education/schools, health services, and to help sustain traditional cultural practices. In this respect, the emphasis on CSR was very much a consequential one to the economic development emphasis, and as highlighted by one RCB CEO, "... [RCBs] were mandated to give financial services. Before you can do any social responsibility, at least you need to be viable. So by providing financial services and the response you get from the inhabitants [in terms of] what you earn from them...., all these things have to come from the profit so if you are not viable, if you aren't making it, is very difficult to meet your social responsibility" (CEO, RCB 1). This shift in attitude was confirmed by one regulator, who stated that, "initially, the RCBs were mainly centred on the interest of shareholders but now they have expanded the concept to involve all stakeholders. That's why the issue of corporate social responsibility is taking on very well because the RCB's have seen that it is not only the shareholders that they have to cater for or be interested in, but also other stakeholders that contribute to the wellbeing of these RCBs." (*Regional Manager ARB, Regulator 1*)

Despite the popularity of RCBs in Ghana, the sector experienced fluctuating performance since their inception. This has led to a series of interventions such as the World Bank-supported Rural Financing Project (RFP) in the 1990s (Mensah et al., 2015), which led to an improved performance up to 1998 but another downturn in 1999 led to the closure of 23 distressed RCBs (Andah and Steel, 2003; Mensah et al., 2015; Obeng, 2008). Since then, and except for a few cases, the RCBs' performance in Ghana has steadily grown and they have become prominent providers of financial services in this predominantly agricultural economy.

Political and cultural influence on RCBs' identity and CSR practices

The RCBs' identity is partially characterised by an engagement with social responsibility, given that they also operate to "support community development services" (Nair and Fisha, 2010, p. 2). For example, one RCB states in its annual report that its mission is to "provide first class financial services to our customers through our motivated and dedicated team and to create maximum value for its shareholders as well as provide responsible service to the community" (RCB5, 2018). One interviewee also commented that there was a good relationship between stakeholders and his bank because "the reasons comes from the fact that, the profit we take from stakeholders, we have to sometimes give it back to them" (CEO, RCB 9). Rather than see organisational identity as one that is fixed/generated by its internal mandate, there is instead this interaction between the social and economic objectives, which provides the impetus for the development of a reciprocal process between the organisation and societal actors (Czarniawksa and Wolf, 1998; Özen and Küskü, 2008).

However, it is important to highlight there are wider political and cultural factors that would affect the RCBs' organisational identity orientation (Atakan and Eker, 2007). Politically, the provision of CSR by RCBs can be associated to the socialist orientation of the first President of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah, who promoted the idea that State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) need to help solve societal problems (Amponsah-Tawiah and Dartey-Baah, 2012). Since the government could not, on its own, handle the numerous multi-faceted societal problems, organisations such as RCBs were called upon to undertake activities that would improve the welfare of societies and communities (e.g. healthcare and education), thus enabling "CSR as an alternative to government" (Blowfield and Frynas, 2005, p. 502). As such, the engagement of political institutions creates a normative foundation for CSR and incorporates a set of values which can affect behaviour and identity (Marti and Scherer, 2016; Perez et al., 2012). Although Ghanaian RCBs are not strictly obliged to undertake CSR activities, there is an expectation within the local community that part of their profits have to be devoted to social

and developmental activities (Mensah, Agyapong, and Nuerthey, 2017). RCBs are “locally owned financial institutions rooted in the community” (Nair and Fisha, 2010, p. 16) and as stated by one of the representatives of the regulator, “... the whole concept of the RCB relates to a community base, and so it [the RCB] is a bank that is earmarked to support the community” (*Regulator 2*).

Relatedly, the Ghanaian culture of gift giving and receiving plays a critical role in CSR practice. Gift giving is viewed as a central part of human behaviour and culture (Ruth et al., 1999; Mauss, 2008) and the influence of national level cultural norms and values of gift giving is known to have a strong influence on corporate practices (Boadu and Sorour, 2015; Dyck and Zingales, 2004; Djankov et al., 2008). In this regard, RCBs appear motivated to give to society with the aim of improving its welfare, and this is seen also as a way of demonstrating gratitude towards the community for establishing stronger ties with the organisation(s). As alluded to in some of the annual reports we accessed, RCBs have been contributing to a number of public services (clinics, police posts and schools) in the region in which they operate, together with providing funds to pay for the activities of traditional councils (involving local chiefs) and event such as National Farmers’ Days. Whilst a review of the available RCBs’ annual reports and websites did not reveal significant detail, there were a few references to CSR (RCB 3, RCB 10, RCB 5 and RCB 1). For example, RCB 3 provided a short description of its CSR activities in the Directors’ Report:

“The bank remains committed to providing support to augment the effort of central government and the district assembly in the provision of critical social amenities to the people we serve. In this connection, we spent [...] on various projects in our schools. Apart from cash

donations to the schools, we also donated two refurbished computers to each of the following schools [.....]" (RCB 3, *Annual Report, 2015*, p. 8²).

In addition, RCB 10 reported that its CSR budget benefited a number of stakeholders, namely the local senior high school, facilities for teachers, the Ministry of Agriculture (towards the National Farmers' Day) and several traditional councils (RCB 10, *Annual Report, 2018*, p. 10). Hence, the annual reports provided an indication of the CSR activities, but with very little context and understanding in terms of organisational motivations and implications for the RCB and its stakeholders.

Insert Table 3 about here

Findings and analysis

Cognitive dimensions: identity orientation and legitimacy

This category focuses on the nature of the interplay between an organisation's identity and its stakeholders i.e. the "assumed nature of association between an organisation and stakeholders as perceived by members" (Brickson, 2007:866). Consistent with Basu and Palazzo (2008) and Brickson (2007) views, the participants have highlighted two forms of identity orientation: individualistic and relational.

First, an individualistic orientation favours organisational self-interest whereby CSR actions are thought of as a means to provide a competitive position to distinguish the organisation from others, but with little consideration in maintaining sustainable ties with external stakeholders. Managers have indicated that the type of CSR activities such as student scholarships, farmers' day monetary and in-kind support is firstly inspired by a calculus of

² Some specific details (financial amounts and name of schools) have been removed to maintain organisational anonymity.

satisfying one's closest stakeholders, and in line with a motivation to garner pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Thus, RCBs think of their CSR activities as a way to garner stakeholder support as reflected in this quote: "it depends on who sits on the board; mostly we have teachers on the board, so they are inclined to [help] schools as they know the headmaster" (*Director, RCB 7*). Several managers supported the idea of, "we do CSR because if the society is good with us, this will impact our financial performance" (*Manager, RCB 3*). A CEO added, "When we do something for schools, we think they will pay the fees through the bank, so it is about making business of CSR" (*CEO, RCB 1*), whilst also ensuring shareholders can also benefit from the community aid, namely that "... regarding scholarships, priority is given towards of shareholders" (*CEO, RCB 1*).

Furthermore, some of the stakeholders have highlighted the exchange (pragmatic) relationship underpinning the individualistic orientation. For example, a school official mentioned that, "the school benefits immensely from the CSR of the banks through the payment of fees for the students. We have about 25 students on such programmes from three RCBs. Our expectation can also be in the area of providing more social amenities in their communities, e.g. boreholes for us." (*Customer, RCB2*). In a similar vein, a customer narrated that, "For me, I was just a customer when I had the opportunity for my son to benefit from the scholarship of the Bank and I have now purchased shares in that RCB. They paid for all the three years and that was helpful." (*Customer, RCB 1*)

Overall, the above reflects a transactional dimension aimed at particular, and somewhat more connected stakeholders (e.g. schools; teachers who are part of the board; customers) with a view to sustain a form of pragmatic legitimacy. This is, by extension, reflective of an individualistic identity orientation in terms promoting the RCB as a local responsible bank intent on helping the community via CSR activities. At the same time, however, a relational form of organisational identity orientation also appears to be prevailing from the interviews.

When prompted about the central, enduring and distinctive aspects of the RCB's identity, one CEO focused his answer on 'whom' do the RCBs specifically stands for. He argued that the RCB has an "image in the sense that the concentration of the bank is on the rural economy that presupposes that we have the farmers, artisans, petty traders and so on and so forth. That is the image we have for ourselves, unlike universal [i.e. mainstream] banks where they focus on industries" (*CEO, RCB 9*). In addition, one of the regulators highlighted how the RCBs' commercial and social motives have become intertwined and crucial for the local community: "So once the bank is able to generate the needed resources in terms of profit and whatever they have to give to the community to also expand the work of the community, that's why it is very important that rural banks have to provide this corporate social responsibility services to these institutions [e.g. schools] or to these communities." (*Regional Manager ARB, Regulator 2*). Lastly, a customer commented that, "I have been with the bank for over 10 years. I think we perceive those rural banks which provides corporate social responsibility as being caring and interested in our well- being. That is why we save with the bank. We know that if we need help they will be there to support" (*Customer, RCB 1*).

From an internal and external viewpoint, RCBs thus appear to be assigning a critical importance to the development of a trusting interdependence with particular stakeholders, characterised by what Brickson (2007, p. 871) refers to as "a high frequency of interaction, reciprocity, emotional intensity and intimacy". This identity orientation is primarily geared towards key constituents within these rural settings (e.g. small farmers, artisans, and traders) and whose activities reflect the backbone of the rural economy and society. A manager stated, "We support farmers' day by day in kind gifts such as spraying tools and boots, but we also award prizes to the best farmer in the district" (*Director, RCB 7*). Also, speaking about the impact of CSR on RCBs employees, managers recognise that as a small community, CSR activities carried out by the bank have a major impact on employees' families as confirmed by

the following quote “for employees CSR activities affect their children and family” (*Manager, RCB 4*). This thus demonstrates a desire of the RCB to foster a longer-term relationship with employees.

This notion of relational identity orientation also emphasises the emotional intensity and intimacy of relationships and one of the most noted areas of interest by RCBs has been in relation to educational activities. Notwithstanding the point that the presence of school officials on RCB boards may lead to more individualistic forms of identity orientation (i.e. favouring a particular agenda of specific board members), many managers acknowledged the crucial nature of education as the ‘right thing to do’ (Suchman, 1995). For example, one manager said that the “focus is on education as it is how the country and the community can develop, we support educating people as this is how they will be able to *fish their own fishes*” (*Manager, RCB 3*). A CEO from a different RCB also narrated how the organisation decided to donate all of its office furniture (although it could have been used internally for a longer period) to schools in its catchment areas. Following further requests, it also contributed to academic support and printed exam books for distribution in primary schools (RCB 9). We argue this points to a form of moral legitimacy in that RCB managers very much emphasised educational support as a ‘socially worthy’ cause for the benefit of the community and judged that such actions would be positively recognised by its stakeholders.

These findings reveal that CSR activities enacted by RCBs point to a blend of organisational identity orientations reflecting individualistic and relational features as well as attempts to maintain pragmatic and moral forms of legitimacy. Of note, managers and stakeholders did not necessarily consider these orientations and legitimacy pursuits to be contradictory or subservient to each other. An individualistic identity orientation appears cogent to both internal and external interviewees in that it underpins a necessary, but limited, transactional relationship initially established by the RCB’s traditional mandate and the need

for this is to be emphasised to maintain organisational legitimacy. Such an orientation also helps motivate the decision-making within the organisation in relation to particular demands of stakeholders and in what ways would these CSR contributions benefit the bank as well i.e. in terms of more customers, deposits and loans.

At the same time, a form of relational identity orientation is present in terms of maintaining longer-term relationships and appears to hinge on the RCB's distinctive portrayal as the organisation that *'looks after'* the local population, and such portrayal is largely consistent with the perceptions of external stakeholders. In turn, there is an element of reciprocity that RCBs very much depend on the support from stakeholders (as customers) to ensure that it can survive and continue to generate adequate profits to support the community. We therefore associate the existence of a relational identity orientation for RCBs to the need to operate interdependently with its immediate stakeholders, and CSR activities aimed at farmers, traders, schools and local people (e.g. bank customers) primarily serve to maintain the identity orientation of the bank. At the same time, the intentions of managers in engaging in various CSR activities reveal a motivation to maintain the organisational legitimacy of a pragmatic and moral nature.

Linguistic dimensions: mainstream modes of justification and need for transparency

RCBs were initially set up to provide a financial service with the aim of engaging in rural development objectives. However, stakeholders expected social contributions, especially the rural people who themselves contributed to the establishment of RCBs. Thus, RCB managers believe that CSR activities were required to underpin RCBs' *'raison d'être'* and in line with the organisation's character. From the regulator's perspective, this was seen as a normative rather than a regulatory requirement, "There is no plan to include CSR as part of the regulations, but they are a norm" (*Regional Manager ARB, Regulator 1*). In this way, managers did not rationalise their CSR activities from a strictly legal frame, but rather in relation to societal

expectations. One CEO aptly pointed out “... actually we feel that is their [the stakeholders’] right because we are making our profit from that same community, so giving it back part of our profit for me is their right to demand. So rural banks are community owned, some of them their grandparents worked hard to establish the bank. So giving it back to that community is their right to demand.” (*CEO, RCB 9*).

Echoing these comments, one customer asserted that the community was mindful about the RCBs’ contribution, and whilst not having access to formal reports, she was aware of which organisations were more socially involved. She commented, “But I will say that people think that they have put their money in making the bank so they expect the bank have to also do something for them. If you do, we see you as being our bank, if you do not, we will not also trust the bank to be our bank. I believe that is the driving factor. So, you see some rural banks are trying to also do social responsibility. But we know those doing and those pretending to do.” (*Customer, RCB 2*).

At the same time, the regulator foresees that such social actions could be further encouraged by reputational factors such as being included in the league tables of good businesses (e.g. Ghana Club 100). One participant said, it is “a response to the community who accepted to do business with you” (*Manager, RCB 1*) and reflective of a form of economic justification underpinned by financial calculations. All participants mentioned the fact that CSR is now a practice that is inherent to what RCBs do every day “there is a wide perception that rural banks already offer community services at no charge, which is CSR” (*Manager, RCB6*). Participants also agreed that stakeholders recognise this special nature of RCBs; for example, one participant said, “Customers come to the bank because they think it is their bank not because of doing CSR... for employees, CSR activities affect their children and family who might be direct beneficiaries of scholarships” (*Director, RCB7*). This point reflects the fact that customers and employees recognise CSR activities of the bank as embedded in their perception

of what an RCB should do. As a result, their utterances go beyond thinking of the RCB purely as a legitimate organisation that supports rightful and good causes at a distance from them personally, but also as *their* local organisation - which reflects a strong signal of association, affiliation and shared values between the RCB and the stakeholders.

From the interviews, there was little in the way of legal and scientific justifications underpinning how managers and stakeholders speak about CSR in their contexts compared to the mainstream settings envisaged by Basu and Palazzo (2008). Instead, CSR appears to have gradually become part of RCB's operating model in terms of how managers and stakeholders make sense of the organisation's identity, ethos and connections towards rural communities. For example, one stakeholder stated, "you see this is a farming community and poverty is relatively high here, so without these supports, parents will not be able to pay the school fees of their wards and on time. With their support, we are sure of receiving our school fees and students that qualify for these scholarships are happy. We have students that graduated from this school and have now completed their teacher training & nursing colleges. So, without the RCB's CSR, we would have all missed these opportunities and the community in general would have been lost these professionals." (*Customer, RCB 2*)

This responsibility to the rural community is generally been well articulated and understood within the organisation, by its members/shareholders and by stakeholders (Atakan and Eker, 2007; Balmer, 1995; Stuart and Whatten, 1985). As such, RCBs have sought to communicate through CSR activities to reinforce this element of their organisational identity to stakeholders and to ensure an alignment between identity and actions. The justifications for contributing to community projects were in many ways associated to an economic rationale of improving standards of living in the rural areas. One interviewee highlighted, "... so for a reason why a particular RCB might undertake a particular project, I might cite my institution as an example. We decided to help put up a senior high school [in the two the RCB operates]

and the essence is that once the people are educated, they will come out, be employed, provide money in the form of savings and what have you, and not only that once they are employed they will pay taxes. The government will also be able to use these taxes to put up other infrastructure that will benefit the larger community that, in the end, will also be beneficial to my bank.” (*Manager, RCB 6*)

Some participants also asserted that CSR actions in themselves help to convey the RCBs’ identity and this was consistent with Brickson’s view (2007, p. 882) that “corporate social responsibility efforts should reflect a business’s mission, values... and identity”. The following quote highlights this meaning “CSR helps us in getting community support and makes society see you in a different way, as really doing what you are supposed to do” (*CEO, RCB 1*). In this regard, an official from local government representatives from a municipal assembly spells out the expectations of stakeholders, “although the rural banks are already aware of their corporate social responsibility practices, it should not be like a stereotyped demand upon them or a legal requirement that they should obey in order for them to remain in business. Our expectation is that, as part of their social practices, they should support or invest more in the Farmers Day celebration. Also, another important expectation is they should pay attention to scholarship packages for its local people or community. They should provide more social amenities for its community as well: for example, provide more boreholes and electricity to less developed rural areas. Basically, these are what is expected of rural banks and they should engage in CSR willingly” (*Dep. Coordinating Director, Municipal Assembly*).

Therefore, engaging in these different activities effectively serves to convey to stakeholders the RCB’s identity as the bank of the community. Such forms of direct communication (Ruth, Otnes and Brunel., 1999) seem to prevail in this opaque setting and there is far less concern about the implications of formal communication (e.g. annual reports). In this respect, there is less of an opportunity for a divergence between communicated and

corporate identity as highlighted by Bravo et al. (2012). This view is aligned with the notion of sense making, as decisions to engage with stakeholders in the form of CSR activities involves the need to reflect the RCB's identity as one that is close and connected to the community; albeit that the culmination of such process is somewhat less visible and not reflected in formal documents (e.g. annual reports). This has particular implications for Basu and Palazzo's (2008) ideas in relation to the notion of transparency since we note that particular settings (such as the one for our study) are far less concerned about the completeness or bias of what is communicated via formal reports. Instead, there seem to be more concerns about the nature and extent of direct interactions between RCBs and its stakeholders.

Focusing further on this communicative and linguistic dimension, one rather challenging part of these interactions relates to how RCB handles requests from stakeholders and in particular, if it deems that it cannot fully entertain the stakeholder's request. One CEO, commented, "when there is a request from a stakeholder or a group of stakeholders who do not fall within what we have earmarked, we cannot meet them fully in that way. [But] just to maintain the cordial relationship, we can meet them halfway if we see that what they going to perform is legal and it is also expected that at least there will be a benefit to the larger group." (CEO, RCB 1). In another example, a CEO set out the process whereby "... first we have to find out whether it is in line with our budget, and we also do a needs assessment whether what they are requesting actually falls in line with our policy.... Sometime ago, some church puts in a request for corporate social responsibility and they wanted us to support them to do a programme. Even enough, I'm a Christian, but feel that this is not in line with our policy, so we have to deny their claim/request." (CEO, RCB 9). In essence, when confronted with 'difficult decisions', managers engage in additional justification and sense-making as to the role of the RCB in social development. For the above-mentioned cases, a common justification for partially (or not at all) agreeing to the stakeholder's request was a concern about the extent

to which the donations would support a larger (and more inclusive) constituency; hence reiterating the RCB's identity as the bank of the community at large.

At the same time, some stakeholders indicated that RCBs could do better when informing stakeholders that their requests could not be fulfilled. One stakeholder stated, "If they cannot afford it, they need to let us know" and other stakeholder said, "the bank's response to our request is very slow and eventually they reject our request due to budget restrictions" (*Dep. Coordinating Director, Municipal Assembly*). Another manager replied that, "people have high expectations from us and when you say no, they do not understand that we have procedures that we have to follow" (*Manager, RCB 3*). Another manager added, "Community is too demanding, and we do not have enough resources, it is just 5% of our profits directed to CSR activities" (*Manager, RCB 1*). Still, some managers were well aware of the relational challenges and knew they "need to establish a forum to have dialogue with the community" (*Manager, RCB 6*). That said, other managers indicated that they communicated well with their stakeholders, even in case of rejecting their requests as indicated by this manager "when we cannot fulfil the request, we meet with the stakeholder and explain to them, we don't only write to them" (*Director, RCB 7*). Another CEO commented that "Ok, what we normally do [when refusing a request] is that, we do it gently, we let them be aware that if we are not able to support this, maybe another time or similar a demand could be supported." (*Deputy CEO, RCB 9*). Lastly, one executive was keen to emphasise that, "... at least the bank has a track record of the previous stakeholders so I don't think they will be so much furious when we are not able to satisfy them. At least we meet and talk to them that this particular year this what we have earmarked, and if possible to shift your demand to the next period or next year so that we can come in" (*CEO, RCB 1*).

Such insights thus reveal the more direct nature of interactions and relationships between the RCBs and the stakeholders (use of meetings, correspondence), and whilst not consistent with the mainstream notion of public transparency (information made available to everyone), it does highlight how some form of accountability is enacted. Relatedly, managers recognised that “so much CSR is done by banks, but less is known by society” (*CEO, RCB 1*). This prompted an explanation as to why banks are cautious in publicising their CSR activities fully, potentially as a way to ‘control’ the number of requests from the public and ensuring that they can continue to fulfil existing requests successfully and in a realistic way. The pursuit of public transparency could arguably be counterproductive and unhelpful to both the RCB and its stakeholders in that there is an impetus to ‘manage downwards’ expectations with a view to maintain stable relations with its stakeholders, and less to do with a ‘cultural’ aversion to disclose such information as documented in earlier work (Jamali and Mirshak, 2007).

In a similar vein, Davila et al. (2018) discussed how community stakeholders were not explicitly identified as such in an analysis of annual reports of Latin American multinational firms and yet, there was disclosure evidence that these firms engaged with these stakeholders using various engagement mechanisms. When this insight is considered in relation to our findings, this arguably reflects the sense-making element of the CSR engagement processes and the efforts made to maintain a relational form of identity orientation with so-called silent stakeholders - whilst downplaying expectations. Finally, we argue that a lack of regulation, i.e. lack of CSR legal/regulatory requirements, allows different RCBs to continue managing stakeholders’ expectations. Although prior work (Perez et al., 2012; Bravo et al., 2012) emphasises public CSR reporting as a projection of their typical organisational identity, RCBs use CSR initiatives actively as a sense-making mechanism to maintain its identity as a community-centred organisation, and at the same time engaging more directly with the stakeholders.

Socio-political-cultural justifications for CSR and organisational identity co-creation

Many interviewees agree that the engagement of RCBs in CSR activities is mainly premised on an organisational identity that embeds social and community support values. However, how this became translated CSR decision-making process varies considerably across RCBs. There does not seem to be one consistent approach in implementing CSR, with some banks having a nominal fraction of their annual budget allocated to such activities, while others do it on an ad-hoc basis as per the requests received from members of the community in their catchment area. This was highlighted in the managers' description of how RCB operationalise their CSR activities as "bank initiated on an ad-hoc basis" (*Manager, RCB 5*) as well as "We have a planning committee to consider community applications and to fit with our designated annual budget of the income after tax" (*Manager, RCB 6*). One CEO highlighted that need to have broad parameters in the decision making and guard against potentially spurious requests so that, "we need not distort our budget and our programs because the demand always come from the stakeholders. The bank has that responsibility [otherwise] one or two people will just form a group just says okay, this is our demand" (*CEO, RCB 1*).

At the same time, the RCBs operate in a specific social, political and cultural context and although RCB managers exhibit some independence in terms of how their organisation chooses to engage in CSR activities, we noted there are key stakeholders who are able to engage more directly with RCBs *on behalf* of the community. In light of the local cultural norms and customs of rural communities in Ghana, interviewees singled out the role of local chiefs (sometimes referred to as the *Nananom* or *Nana*) who play an influential role in directing public opinion. It was noted that, "we go to opinion leaders [*Chiefs or Nananom or Nana*] and ask them what they want, which we do if possible" (*Manager, RCB 3*). Another participant explained his justification when facing requests to help a school and to support the local chief's activities, "festivals are certain periods that you have to observe, so if *Nana* requests, we feel

that we look at *Nana* as somebody who provides a good environment for us to operate. This does not mean that the request should be [more important] than the school, but we look at it in the view that we may even support the school with a higher amount than *Nana* but it depends on the period that the request is. We know that the *Odwura* festival is in a certain period that the Chief observes, and so we would rather satisfy *Nana* first and that the schools could be satisfied later.” (CEO, RCB 9). This reveals the influence of local culture and traditional structures in the process of shaping CSR practices of RCBs and dovetails prior work by Uddin et al. (2018).

Other interviewees also highlighted the powerful nature of local chiefs and how they are able to steer which community activities should be privileged by RCBs, “yes, they can, in our community the opinion leaders have a veto power, you cannot deny their influence. If Chiefs, *Omanhene*, *Odikros* are spearheading then it becomes very difficult. That’s where the political influence comes in” (CEO, RCB 1). In a similar vein, another participant added, “Although our CSR activities are community driven, the stronger the influence of the person raising a request, the more likely the request will be approved” (Manager, RCB 5).

In the local context, there is also some influence from political actors (elected officials and local government). Interviewees (comments supported by a review of the annual reports) indicate that the majority of CSR work being undertaken can be classified as ‘public goods’ e.g. health, education, and supporting farming activities, arguably in line with the socialist orientation of Ghana’s political leadership and the related intentions in the setting up of RCBs. This can be noticed in the following quotes: “we support any school needs”; “CSR includes studentships, donations to farmers, attachment to students and generally try to fulfil help requests from the public” (CEO, RCB1). Another CEO highlighted the arguably more collaborative nature of the relationship between political actors and the RCBs, “... as for political influence they are there, but they actually support us in a way so sometimes we look

at their demand. I am saying this because for example there is a project called community based rural development project. The politicians use it as a conduit to satisfy those stakeholders, in this case we provided 20% of the required amount and they provided 80%, here, there was a collaboration by which we were able to satisfy the stakeholder who are our customers” (CEO, RCB 9). In essence, therefore, and whilst this is not seen as crucial as in the case of the local chiefs, there is some degree of recognition of the political influence on the CSR activities. This suggests that due to limited institutional setting in rural areas (Amaeshi et al., 2016), RCBs do adjust their stance to step in and help local government and politicians to address issues faced by their immediate communities.

In parallel to the role of specific actors (i.e. chiefs and local political/government), the local culture of gift-giving and receiving has a great impact in maintaining social ties and serves as a means of symbolic communication in social relationships. This social act is perceived to have a dominant influence on business practices. The act of gift giving has unofficially become part of business practice in Ghana (Mauss, 2008; Boadu and Sorour, 2015). Thus, this culture of gift giving and receiving can influence the provision of CSR as indicated by one manager “... we give gifts to our stakeholders, particularly customers and suppliers, they also send us gifts and we accept them, and this creates a good relationship for business. Gift giving is a societal norm and we need to always appreciate the contributions of our stakeholders?” (*Manager, RCB 4*). This also indicates that the CSR engagement process is indeed a sense-making process where decisions are made due to the “precipitating causes” of impact on society such as cultural norms of the region. In addition, the acts of giving and receiving are used to express gratitude. RCBs also give to the *Nananom* during occasions as a sign of appreciation. The act can be both solicited and unsolicited, particularly from the chiefs. One participant suggested: “... we generally as Ghanaians have a way of saying thank you, and during festivals,

Ghanaians will say thank you in one way or the other, you know some of them, people have ways of... These donations help create good relationship” (*Manager, RCB 3*).

Informed by the above, we note the importance of social, cultural and political ‘language games’ framed around the influence of chiefs, political/local government actors and cultural expectations of gift-giving in these particular rural settings. However, we contend that Basu and Palazzo’s (2008) framework appears to have so far adopted a context-free approach in relation to their notion of justifications and language games (Kolk and Rivera-Santos, 2018). The governance deficits and political aspirations to improve the living conditions of the rural areas, as well as local customs represented by opinion leaders, thus play a more central role in determining what CSR activities an RCB engages with and by extension, how its identity is being constructed and conveyed to. This also chimes with Jamali et al.’s (2017) CSR-state logics in terms how the wishes of political and opinion leaders mediate CSR activities and underpin managerial justifications. In this regard, we contend that these social, political and cultural factors buttress the RCB’s organisation identity orientation whereby specific and influential stakeholders, whose primacy arises from local customs/politics, contribute to an ‘informal co-creation’ of the RCBs’ identity through the selection of CSR activities.

In conclusion, we conceive of the RCBs’ organisational identity as one that remains closely connected to the relationship with the community stakeholders and how these stakeholders, by virtue of their expectations or demands, help maintain this identity. Whilst the nature and quantum of the social contributions may well be symbolic in some cases and thus reflect the notion of ‘light shower’ mentioned by Perez et al. (2012), we highlight that the RCB’s CSR activities generate a ‘substantive’ value as a result of the political and cultural context. Lastly, we bring to the fore the different modes of justifications underpinning CSR activities and the implications of a different mechanism of transparency in the interactions between stakeholders and RCBs.

Concluding Remarks

Our research questions focused on how RCBs in Ghana engage in CSR activities and how far CSR might contribute to the shaping or maintaining of organisational identity. Informed by the theoretical perspectives of organisational identity orientation and sense making, our article first highlights the ways and means by which some organisations and their stakeholders interact in relation to CSR practice. This interaction helps sustain the RCB's dual identity in relation to the social and the economic imperatives and essentially CSR is a process by which an RCB can make sense of external stakeholders' needs and reflect on the precipitating causes of engaging with them through cognitive and linguistic dimensions. This perspective and the empirical evidence thus positions CSR as a means to communicate the RCBs' identity, as a process to bring together internal and some external actors in co-creating organisational identity and lastly, as a way to model the nature of its orientation towards stakeholders and achieve legitimacy from a pragmatic and moral perspective.

Contributions to the literature

Our findings and insights contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, we bring insights on how CSR, as a sense-making process involving internal and external stakeholders, contributes to the RCBs' primarily relational organisational identity orientation, emphasising *interaction* and *reciprocity*. Managers and stakeholders make sense of the organisation's identity through CSR-related interactions and "find plausible versions of what they are confronting and how to best proceed" (Colville, 2012, p. 197). We bring to the fore the theoretical notion of *identity co-creation* arising from such CSR engagement. RCB managers engage with stakeholders during CSR engagement, justify their actions and decisions, and maintain their legitimacy. In turn, stakeholders engage with RCBs in terms of making requests and interacting at the board level, thereby enabling an 'informal' co-creation of organisational identity between internal and external actors. This finding highlights how CSR engagement

interplays with organisational identity, beyond its role as a mechanism for identity communication (Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Bravo, Matute and Pina, 2012) and complementary to the extant findings on the dissonance between communicated (e.g. in reports) and ‘actual’ identity (as set out in mission statements). In this way, we emphasise the multiple layer(s) upon which CSR activities interplays with organisational identity.

Secondly, we extend Basu and Palazzo’s (2008) ‘linguistic dimensions’ by emphasising the role of cultural/political justifications in underpinning some of the RCBs’ decisions to engage in CSR activities. In contrast to the mainstream justifications set out by Basu and Palazzo (2008), we highlight the nuanced complexities of CSR engagement as a process that affects, and is affected by the internal organisational ‘character’ i.e. organisational identity, and the external environment. In particular, there is a prevalence of socio-cultural and political justifications from the external environment, as previously highlighted in work examining the case of developing countries (e.g. Uddin et al., 2018). In our case therefore, we argue that organisations do engage in CSR on the basis of a combination of a ‘business-survival’-case and ‘cultural and political’- reasons that take a due consideration of managerial and stakeholder expectations, and ultimately contribute to maintaining organisational identity. Hence, we bring evidence in support of the diversity of CSR practice and rationales in the developing world (Jamali et al., 2017) and rather than driven by international pressures (e.g. multinationals, foreign buyers, international standards), we single out the rural development motivations underlying the creation and operation of RCBs in a given political and cultural context. This finding also contributes to the recent work of Jamali et al. (2017) by highlighting a case where multiple logics for CSR (social, cultural and political) contribute to the co-creation of organisational identity.

Third, our findings do highlight the private nature of the communication process with stakeholders, where there is less emphasis on elaborate public available accountability

mechanisms such as CSR reporting. Whilst ‘opaqueness’ might be seen to be at odds with Basu and Palazzo’s (2008) notions of transparency and with the mainstream ‘market-inspired’ calls for ‘public’ information, our findings instead highlight the primacy of direct interactions with privileged community stakeholders in relation to CSR initiatives. This approach can be contrasted with the traditional view of communicated identity (Bravo et al., 2012) through CSR reports and websites; aspects which are somewhat lacking in what seek to characterise as an ‘opaque’ context studied in our case. In other words, there is little in the way of a visible and open dialogue or contest between stakeholders and organisation (which would somewhat lead to a ‘response’ in the form of CSR activities and accountability. Hence, this opaqueness or transparency ‘deficit’ is understood differently in our study, whereby ‘transparency’ involves direct interactions and explanations to relevant stakeholders, in a way that might traditionally be seen as opaque (i.e. no information is shared at all beyond the organisation).

Future Research and Limitations

We would encourage further research on the ‘multiple logics’ underlying CSR activity and how they are implicated in maintaining, shifting and/or conveying organisational identity. At the same time, the findings in our view assert the dialectical and sense-making perspectives of CSR in terms of how different parties talk about, reflect on, and practice CSR (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). We contend that our study highlights the potential for additional insights to the CSR literature due to the existence of varying social, political and cultural dynamics in different regions and/or organisational settings in developing countries. Whilst such contexts do lead to particular challenges in terms of fieldwork access, we advocate more in-depth studies of CSR activities in addition to the traditional methods of interviews and organisational documentation. Further research could also expand on the different discourses and interactions between CSR beneficiaries and organisations, particularly in relation to studying contexts where there is little to no transparency. Moreover, while this study has hinted at the co-existence of the varying

organisational identities within the RCB field, further work could consider how such multiple identities might co-exist within the same organisations.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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