COMMUNICATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY. BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN BUSINESSES AND COMMUNITIES – THE CASE OF HEIDELBERG MATERIALS ROMANIA

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Abstract: The shift from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to corporate sustainability has reshaped how organisations relate to the communities in which they operate. While conceptual frameworks such as CSR, ESG, and responsible business conduct have been extensively examined, less attention has been paid to the communicative practices through which organisations build and sustain legitimacy at the local level. This paper examines the case of Heidelberg Materials Romania, which has developed two structured community dialogue mechanisms – *Sfatul Bătrânilor* (Elders' Council) and *Sfatul Jurnaliştilor* (Journalists' Council) – since 2011. Drawing on document analysis of sustainability reports (2011–2022) and corporate communication materials, the paper traces how these mechanisms evolved from CSR-era initiatives into embedded governance practices. The analysis shows that consistency, recurrence, and transparency are key communicative conditions for organisational legitimacy in industrial contexts.

Keywords: community dialogue; corporate sustainability; stakeholder engagement; organisational communication; Heidelberg Materials Romania

1. Introduction

In contemporary societies, organisations such as companies, institutions, and NGOs play a significant role in people's and communities' lives. They operate within social contexts, interacting with communities to an extent that generates real social effects – effects that extend well beyond purely economic indicators.

As those impacts were at times negative, organisations initially turned to sponsorship and philanthropic initiatives to support the community. These practices, grounded in a reciprocal exchange logic, were aimed at balancing corporate activity and community acceptance. Over time, however, such initiatives proved limited as a basis for a sustained, long-term relationship, and organisations progressively turned to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – a more structured approach to evolving social expectations, through community-oriented projects and formal accountability mechanisms. CSR emerged as an organisational response, demonstrating responsibility and strengthening acceptance within respective communities (Carroll, 1991).

In many cases, CSR remained a project-based approach, aimed at visibility rather than genuine integration within communities. In a social context of growing complexity, with multiple stakeholders and diverse expectations, this short-term focus showed its limitations. The long-term challenges of acceptance and continuity, and the search for coherence beyond isolated projects, led organisations toward adaptability, adjustment,

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and internalisation – processes that gained the shape of organisational learning and, ultimately, sustainability (Dyllick and Muff, 2016).

This paper examines how this transition from CSR to sustainability plays out in practice, with particular attention to the communicative dimension. Specifically, it asks: how have Heidelberg Materials Romania's structured community dialogue initiatives evolved from CSR tools into embedded sustainability practices, and what do they suggest about the communicative conditions for organisational legitimacy? To answer this question, the paper draws on document analysis of sustainability reports and examines two community councils established by the company since 2011.

2. From CSR to sustainability: context and key concepts

Due to changes in modern society and its expectations, corporate responsibility has evolved considerably. Organisations have been increasingly required to think about their role in the social context from a long-term perspective. CSR – as a set of separate and self-contained initiatives – was progressively challenged, pushing organisations to design an integrated sustainability framework that addresses economic, social, and environmental aspects together (Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). This does not replace CSR but extends and reframes it, towards a better understanding of responsibility, impact, and community over time (Bansal and DesJardine, 2014).

The conceptual genealogy of corporate responsibility begins with philanthropy – sporadic, non-structured gestures of support to communities. The institutionalisation of this impulse into a recognisable framework was theorised most influentially by Carroll (1991), whose pyramid of corporate social responsibility proposed four hierarchical levels of obligation: economic (be profitable), legal (obey the law), ethical (be ethical), and philanthropic (be a good corporate citizen). This pyramid offered organisations a way to think about responsibility as layered, with philanthropy representing the apex of voluntary social contribution.

Carroll's model proved foundational and widely adopted, but it also drew criticism for its hierarchical structure. More importantly, CSR in Carroll's formulation remained largely unidirectional: the company decides what to do for the community, based on its own assessment of needs. The community remains a recipient rather than a participant. Stakeholders' expectations became increasingly included in CSR as organisational practices (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). Yet even institutionalised, CSR often remained project-based – discrete initiatives, hardly integrated into the broader practices of organisations, aimed primarily at generating visibility rather than sustaining engagement (Santoso, Harefa, and Fuadah, 2024).

Corporate sustainability introduces the shift from fragmented responsibility to systemic integration. It promotes alignment of economic performance, social impact, and environmental stewardship into a unified strategic perspective (Montiel and Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). Dyllick and Muff (2016) provide one of the most useful frameworks for understanding this transition. Their typology distinguishes three levels: CSR 1.0, focused on managing negative externalities while maintaining business-as-usual; CSR 2.0, which integrates sustainability into business strategy but remains primarily concerned with firm-level value creation; and "true business sustainability" (CSR 3.0), which reverses the logic entirely, starting from societal and environmental challenges and asking how business can contribute to addressing them.

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An essential distinction between CSR and corporate sustainability is the temporal dimension. CSR initiatives often operate within short- or medium-term horizons, while sustainability is inherently long-term oriented. Responsibility thus shifts to sustainability by framing continuity, resilience, and adaptive capacity as a long-term commitment rather than a succession of CSR episodes (Bansal and DesJardine, 2014; Wang and Bansal, 2012).

In both academic and regulatory discourse, several related concepts have emerged alongside CSR and corporate sustainability: corporate citizenship, ESG, and responsible business conduct. Corporate citizenship positions the organisation as a social actor with public responsibilities. ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) has developed primarily as a framework for reporting and evaluation. Responsible business conduct, found mainly in public policy and international governance, highlights compliance, due diligence, and alignment with international standards (Passa, 2024; OECD, 2025). These concepts formalise responsibility through metrics and reporting, but do not address the qualitative dimension of the relationship between organisations and communities.

On the other hand, sustainability plans must move from frameworks to real-life environments, where organisations depend not only on regulatory approval but on social acceptance. Legitimacy is not taken for granted – it is a relationship that must be built and tested over time (Suchman, 1995). Communities are decisive for operational continuity, particularly in contexts involving visible social and environmental effects (Pfajfar et al., 2022; Mahajan et al., 2023). Consistent and structured interaction with communities helps sustainability go beyond occasional meetings or one-time consultations. Engagement that becomes recurrent, structured, and traceable helps organisations understand risks, identify important concerns, and adapt their strategies. Communication practices are not merely supplementary activities; they contribute to governance processes and strengthen an organisation's ability to maintain legitimacy over time (Pfajfar et al., 2022).

3. Community dialogue as a communication practice

The concepts of dialogue, consultation, and engagement are frequently used interchangeably in corporate communication practice, yet they carry meaningfully different implications for the distribution of voice, agency, and power between organisations and communities. At the most basic level, organisations may engage in information provision: one-way communication with no expectation of feedback. Consultation moves one step further: organisations invite input from community members, but retain full decision-making authority. Dialogue, as theorised by Taylor and Kent (2014), implies a qualitatively different mode of interaction characterised by mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. Co-production represents a further level, in which communities function as co-designers of decisions (Johnston, 2014).

These distinctions matter because they shape the conditions under which trust and legitimacy can develop. Genuine dialogue creates the conditions for communities to experience themselves as heard and taken seriously, a prerequisite for the long-term trust that sustains organisational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). The OECD (2020) deliberative participation models similarly point to the importance of institutionalised,

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recurrent mechanisms for public engagement, as distinct from one-off consultative events.

4. Data sources and methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents as a means of eliciting meaning, gaining understanding, and developing empirical knowledge. It is particularly well-suited to examining organisational practice over time.

The primary data sources are Heidelberg Materials Romania's sustainability reports published between 2011 and 2022, with particular attention to the most recent available report at the time of research (Heidelberg Materials Romania, 2002), supplemented by publicly available corporate communication materials, including website content and press releases. The study is designed as a single-case, exploratory investigation (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Swanborn, 2018). Single-case studies are appropriate when the case is analytically significant, when it illuminates a phenomenon of broader relevance that cannot be captured through large-N comparison. This study constitutes the first stage of a broader research programme; a second stage will extend the analysis through interviews with company representatives and community members.

The analysis covers 2011–2022. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on self-reported corporate documents, which may be subject to reporting bias (Swanborn, 2018). Second, the study is based on a single case, which limits the scope for generalisation. Third, the absence of sustainability reports after 2022 constitutes a gap to be addressed in Stage 2. These limitations are inherent to the chosen methodology and are offset by the longitudinal depth of the dataset.

5. The case of Heidelberg Materials Romania

Heidelberg Materials Romania operates in the construction materials sector: cement production, aggregates, ready-mixed concrete, and related building materials. The company has a long-standing presence in small communities, including Chişcădaga, Taşca, and Fieni, where it operates cement plants, quarries, and concrete production units. The company's main activities in these environments involve extracting natural resources, significant transportation flows, and sustained industrial activity.

Beyond legal compliance, the continuity of operations depends on social acceptance in these localities – what the literature on extractive industries refers to as a "social licence to operate" (Prno and Slocombe, 2012). Company reports acknowledge community-related concerns within their management systems, including references to ISO standards and the identification of potential risks for local communities. This makes Heidelberg Materials Romania a relevant setting for examining how structured interaction with communities may evolve from CSR initiatives toward sustained engagement.

5.1. Sfatul Bătrânilor (Elders' Council)

The *Sfatul Bătrânilor* (Elders' Council) is an initiative launched in 2011 as a structured stakeholder consultation platform in the host communities of Heidelberg Materials Romania's cement plants in Chişcădaga, Taşca, and Fieni. According to the company's

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sustainability reports (Heidelberg Materials Romania, 2012; 2022), it was established as the primary mechanism for stakeholder engagement at the local level and as a formal channel for identifying, monitoring, and addressing community concerns.

The Council includes both formal and informal local opinion leaders: mayors, priests, school principals, teachers, representatives of public authorities, and members of civil society. Meetings are organised twice a year at each location. The stated goals are to strengthen local community leadership groups, facilitate discussion of local problems, encourage community members to raise issues openly, and align identified concerns with the company's plans and actions.

Over time, the Council has been integrated into broader management and governance processes. Topics raised during Council meetings were subsequently incorporated into the company's decision-making. Maintaining this regular dialogue is referenced in the company's official risk prevention system under ISO 9001:2015. The initiative thus functions not only as a dialogue platform, but as a structured mechanism for community input into organisational learning and strategic adjustment. Participation numbers increased, themes were documented and monitored, and discussions were explicitly linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These developments are documented in successive sustainability reports (Heidelberg Materials Romania, 2015; 2022).

5.2. Sfatul Jurnaliştilor (Journalists' Council)

The *Sfatul Jurnaliştilor* (Journalists' Council) was created as a complementary initiative to the Elders' Council, with a specific focus on local journalists from Chişcădaga, Taşca, and Fieni. Its purpose was to involve local media leaders more actively in discussions about community concerns arising from proximity to the cement plants. The Council brings together journalists from local and regional press in structured meetings, typically organised twice a year at each plant. Over the years, dozens of journalists participated in these meetings, indicating that the dialogue was recurrent rather than occasional (Heidelberg Materials Romania, 2013; 2022).

The two Councils serve complementary communicative functions. This complementarity is reflected in the company's reporting practice (Heidelberg Materials Romania, 2022). While the Elders' Council channels community voice inward — feeding concerns and priorities into the company's decision-making — the Journalists' Council projects transparency outward, ensuring that the company's actions are communicated through locally credible intermediaries. Together, they constitute a two-directional communication architecture that goes beyond the unidirectional information provision typical of conventional CSR communication.

5.3. Evolution over time: from CSR projects to sustained engagement

Tracing the evolution of Heidelberg Materials Romania's community engagement over more than a decade reveals a trajectory that broadly mirrors the conceptual shift from CSR to corporate sustainability described in Section 2. Rather than a planned transition, this evolution appears to have emerged organically, driven by the accumulation of experience and the progressive alignment of community engagement with broader sustainability frameworks.

In the period 2000–2010, the company's approach was characteristic of what Dyllick and Muff (2016) classify as CSR 1.0: philanthropic and reputational in orientation,

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focused on discrete projects. Carroll's (1991) philanthropic level was the dominant register. The launch of the *Sfatul Bătrânilor* in 2011 marked a first significant shift – from episodic philanthropy toward what Taylor and Kent (2014) would recognise as a dialogic orientation. The subsequent launch of the *Sfatul Jurnaliştilor* around 2013, and the integration of both Councils into official sustainability reports, signalled institutionalisation. The alignment with the UN SDGs in 2015 connected community engagement to a global normative framework. The pandemic period (2020–2021) provided an important test of institutional resilience: dialogue continued online, and the company responded with education and health support initiatives.

Taken together, this trajectory illustrates a gradual progression along the levels of social licence to operate identified by Moffat and Zhang (2014): from basic acceptance toward approval and, in some instances, toward psychological identification. This progression required more than a decade of consistent, structured, and documented engagement.

6. Discussion

Sfatul Bătrânilor has operated for over twelve years, with meetings held twice yearly at each location. Suchman's (1995) framework helps explain why this matters. Legitimacy is not achieved by a single act but is accumulated through predictable, repeated behaviour over time. An organisation that consistently shows up, listens, responds, and reports back gradually earns "cognitive legitimacy": the taken-for-granted acceptance that it is a reliable presence in the community. This is qualitatively different from the "pragmatic legitimacy" generated by individual CSR projects, which do not accumulate into a durable relational foundation. Trust cannot be built on demand or in response to a crisis; it requires prior investment in consistent engagement.

The dialogue mechanisms described in Section 3 have concrete implications for how community concerns are identified and how resources are allocated. Community members – including mayors, priests, teachers, and local journalists – bring local knowledge that is not available through other channels. Their input has directly influenced the company's community investment priorities. This is precisely what Taylor and Kent (2014) mean by the "risk" dimension of dialogue: genuine dialogue creates the possibility that community input will change the organisation's course of action. Carroll's (1991) philanthropic CSR, however well-intentioned, positions the company as the arbiter of community need. The Councils partially invert this logic by making community members active participants in identifying priorities.

From a theoretical perspective, the case operationalises the transition outlined in Section 2. The gradual institutionalisation of recurrent dialogue mechanisms reflects a movement from project-based CSR toward governance-embedded sustainability. What began as structured consultation evolved into a communicative infrastructure that aligns with dialogic engagement theory (Taylor and Kent, 2014) and with legitimacy accumulation through repeated interaction (Suchman, 1995). The case therefore illustrates how communicative practice can function as a mediating mechanism between sustainability frameworks and lived community experience.

Research on social licence to operate (Moffat and Zhang, 2014) consistently shows that procedural fairness – the perception that the decision-making process is fair, not just its outcomes – is a stronger predictor of community trust than the content of individual projects.

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The *Sfatul Jurnaliştilor* introduces a dimension of transparency that complements the inward-facing function of the Elders' Council. Transparency, in this context, means communicating what the company does and why, through channels that are credible to local communities. Local journalists serve as trusted intermediaries, extending the reach of accountability beyond the company's own publications. This dual architecture – inward dialogue through the Elders' Council, outward transparency through the Journalists' Council – constitutes a "communicative infrastructure" for sustainability that is particularly important in contexts where formal ESG reporting may not reach or be meaningful to community members most affected by day-to-day industrial operations.

The Heidelberg Materials Romania case offers several lessons for organisations seeking to move beyond project-based CSR. First, structured and recurrent mechanisms – not one-off events – are the building blocks of trust. Second, dialogue that creates genuine room for community input into decision-making generates legitimacy more durably than philanthropy. Third, transparency requires locally credible intermediaries. Fourth, long-term engagement requires institutional embedding rather than dependence on individual champions or episodic goodwill. At the same time, caution is warranted in generalising from a single case; the conditions that made this model possible may not be replicable in all contexts.

7. Conclusions

The case of Heidelberg Materials Romania offers evidence that the transition from CSR to corporate sustainability is, at its core, a communicative achievement. Three findings stand out. First, structured and recurrent dialogue, maintained consistently over more than a decade, proves to be the primary mechanism through which organisational legitimacy is accumulated at the local level. Unlike episodic CSR initiatives, which generate pragmatic legitimacy tied to individual projects, the *Sfatul Bătrânilor* and *Sfatul Jurnaliștilor* produced a form of cognitive legitimacy: the taken-for-granted acceptance of the company as a reliable and accountable presence in the community (Suchman, 1995). Second, genuine dialogue, as defined by Taylor and Kent (2014), has concrete governance implications. When community members participate in identifying priorities, procedural fairness is enhanced, and resource allocation reflects local knowledge rather than corporate assumptions. Third, transparency is most effective when it operates through locally credible intermediaries. The dual architecture of the two Councils – inward dialogue and outward communication – constitutes a model of communicative infrastructure for sustainability that goes well beyond conventional ESG reporting.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Carroll's (1991) philanthropic model and Dyllick and Muff's (2016) integrated sustainability orientation are not merely successive conceptual stages but qualitatively different communicative modes. Moving from one to the other requires a willingness to engage with communities in an open way, rather than just planning strategically. Heidelberg Materials Romania shows that genuine dialogue and transparency are key to sustainability.

The company's experience can serve as a model for businesses. The move from one to the other depends less on strategic planning than on the willingness to institutionalise sustained, two-directional engagement with communities.

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7.1. Study limitations

This study is based on self-reported corporate documents and a single case, which limits both the independence of the data and the scope for generalisation. The absence of community members' own accounts constitutes a significant gap: the analysis cannot assess whether community participants experienced the Councils as genuinely dialogic or as managed consultation. These limitations will be addressed in stage 2 of the research.

The planned second stage will involve semi-structured interviews with company representatives and community members at the three plant locations, to triangulate the document-based findings and explore how the dialogue mechanisms are experienced from the community side. Future research might also examine comparable cases in other industrial sectors and national contexts and investigate the relationship between structured community dialogue and measurable sustainability outcomes.

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