



Integrating corporate social responsibility into conservation policy. The example of business commitments to contribute to the French National Biodiversity Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is receiving an increased attention in biodiversity policy. This exploratory study analyses biodiversity-oriented corporate practices and stakeholders' involvement in their implementation based on a content analysis of 34 business commitment plans endorsed as contributions to the French National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). A trans-sectoral typology of practices emerged from this analysis. This typology categorizes, on one hand, CSR practices that directly mitigate biodiversity loss, and on the other hand, procedural activities supporting a better integration of biodiversity issues. External stakeholders were found to be involved in more than two thirds of the CSR actions and played different roles depending if they belonged to the territorial system, the value chain or the institutional system the company. The article concludes with a number of implications for policy-makers as well as business managers and opens research avenues.

1. Introduction

Halting biodiversity erosion is a tremendous challenge, as human-induced biodiversity loss has reached exceptionally high rates (Ceballos et al., 2017). It has been argued that the governance of biodiversity cannot rely solely on a law-based approach, but that a multiplicity of other sources of normative rules, integrating the potential role of all groups with relevant interests, are necessary to design an effective policy portfolio (Doremus, 2003; Sampford, 2002). Given the role companies play in biodiversity alteration and their financial and political power, expectations regarding business contribution to biodiversity conservation are growing (Robinson, 2012). In 2010, the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Convention for biological diversity (CBD), the main international governance body for biodiversity conservation, adopted a Decision entitled “*Business engagement*” that “[r]ecognizes] the importance of drawing on the capacities of business and private enterprise” and invited the parties “to promote a public policy environment that enables private sector engagement and the mainstreaming of biodiversity into corporate strategies and decision-making” (COP10 CBD, 2010). Such an engagement of companies in biodiversity conservation can be considered as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR), as CSR “concerns actions by companies over and above their legal obligations

towards society and the environment” (European Commission, 2011). Mobilizing CSR in conservation policy thus rely on non-coercive, voluntary approaches (Börkey et al., 2000).

While biodiversity issues had been poorly integrated in CSR compared to other environmental challenges (Ernst and Honoré-Rougé, 2012), this political momentum seems to have participated to bring biodiversity issues to economic actors' attention. In a survey comprising more than 1500 business executives, 64% answered that biodiversity was important to some level to their companies (Bonini and Oppenheim, 2010). Disclosure on biodiversity issues in CSR reporting has also significantly increased these last years (Adler et al., 2017). A multiplicity of international standard-settings and monitoring mechanisms have been developed in line with the framework provided by the CBD (Morgera, 2012), along with new assessment tools (Wolff et al., 2017a). While this gain of visibility may have led firms to put biodiversity higher on their political agenda, whether this translates into concrete efforts to reduce biodiversity loss still needs to be investigated. This materialization is not obvious as the implementation of practical measures has been found to be challenging for companies (Overbeek et al., 2013; Robinson, 2012). Criticisms have raised regarding the effectiveness and the legitimacy of mobilizing the private sector (MacDonald, 2010; Robinson, 2012; Rose and Colchester, 2004).

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Understanding what are (or could be) the effective conservation impacts of biodiversity-oriented CSR has thus become critical for conservationists and policy makers (Sutherland et al., 2009): What kind of concrete practices do companies put in place as part of their CSR? Who is involved in their implementation? How to integrate CSR in the policy portfolio so that it effectively contributes to the achievement of conservation objectives?

Biodiversity-oriented CSR approaches have been somewhat overlooked in the scientific literature. A few studies looked more closely at the corporate practices of specific sectors, such as farming (de Snoo et al., 2013; Santangeli et al., 2016), fish processing (Wolff and Schmitt, 2009), forestry and mining (Boiral and Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2017a) but this literature is still fragmented. There is thus a need to undertake a trans-sectoral review of business initiatives and to develop a comprehensive framework to classify and interpret them in a consistent manner (Winn and Pogutz, 2013). Several studies have pointed out that stakeholders involvement was crucial in the implementation of corporate practices related to biodiversity conservation, notably because of their complexity and the need for business to comfort the legitimacy of such measures (Boiral and Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2017b; Overbeek and Harms, 2011; Reade et al., 2014). The collective nature of biodiversity-oriented CSR practices thus seems to be an important parameter to take into account if contribution of businesses to biodiversity conservation is to be fostered.

The French National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) 2011–2020 includes a public voluntary program (Börkey et al., 2000). This policy instrument is used to officially endorse commitment plans of organizations that contribute to the achievement of biodiversity conservation objectives. These commitment plans provide a quite detailed description of the actions that companies have put in place or plan to undertake. Building on the case study of the NBSAP corporate commitment plans, the objectives of this article are to propose a classification of biodiversity-oriented CSR practices, to provide some insights regarding the roles played by stakeholders in their implementation and based on this analysis to draw some lessons on how to better integrate CSR in the policy portfolio for biodiversity conservation.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review on biodiversity-oriented CSR. Then, Section 3 describes the case study and the methodology used to analyze the corporate commitment plans. The results are subsequently presented in Section 4 in line with the research questions. Finally, Section 5 discusses the study's implications for policy makers and business managers as well as avenues for future research.

2. Biodiversity-oriented CSR

2.1. Positioning CSR in the policy portfolio for biodiversity conservation

There is a spectrum of policy options to engage businesses in biodiversity conservation: coercive approaches based on 'command and control' regulation (e.g. fishing quotas), market-based mechanisms (e.g. payment for ecosystem services and certification schemes) (Lambooy and Levashova, 2011; Pirard, 2012) and voluntary approaches (with or without financial compensation) (Santangeli et al., 2016). Voluntary approaches are schemes whereby firms make commitments to improve their environmental performance (Börkey et al., 2000). Thus, CSR relates primarily to voluntary approaches, although market-based options can also be framed to fit within CSR definition. Three main types of voluntary approaches can be distinguished: unilateral commitments made by companies, environmental negotiated agreements between industry and public authorities and public voluntary programs (Börkey et al., 2000). The French NBSAP instrument on which is based this article is an example of public voluntary program for biodiversity conservation. Public authorities may develop other more indirect techniques to influence CSR (Steurer, 2010).

Compared to regulatory and market-based mechanisms, the

rationalities that shape the adoption of CSR practices are less explicit, and so are the political levers. Three forces may contribute to institutionalize CSR practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; King and Lenox, 2000):

- coercive forces relate to the pressures institutional stakeholders can exert even in the absence of explicit penalties. Companies failing to respond to such external pressures are exposed to potential impacts on their political influence and legitimacy. Drivers of business engagement in ecological issues thus typically encompass improved regulatory compliance, social license to operate, reduced risk of conflict as well as access to capital (a growing number of investors and financing agencies impose ecological standards, such as the International Finance Corporation performance standard on biodiversity conservation and sustainable management of living natural resources (IFC, 2012)) (Barkemeyer et al., 2015).
- normative forces relate to the professionalization of firms notably through the development of sectoral standards. Certification systems and norms, whether they are public (the European organic certification) or private (e.g. the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Global reporting initiative (GRI)) contribute to make more operational and concrete the issues of biodiversity for the company, acting as vectors of appropriation of these issues.
- mimetic forces contribute to the development of environmental CSR through the dissemination of information on best practices, private benefits and competitors' performances.

Thus CSR is not a policy tool for biodiversity conservation by itself but rather a corporate contribution that can be influenced and fostered by a spectrum of policy instruments.

2.2. Business-biodiversity interactions and CSR practices

Business engagement in biodiversity conservation can encompass a large variety of practices (CBD, online; Schaltegger and Beständig, 2012). How corporate activities interact with biodiversity and ecosystem services orientates the strategy and types of measures that may be adopted by a company (Houdet et al., 2012). Three types of business-biodiversity interplay can be distinguished (Feger, 2016; Overbeek et al., 2013):

- 1 business activities *negatively affect biodiversity*. Five types of anthropic pressures are responsible for biodiversity loss: habitat change, overexploitation of wild populations, invasive species, pollutions and climate change (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; SCBD, 2010). Companies may exert such ecological pressures not only on their own industrial sites, but also beyond their land and premises, at multiple stages of their value chain through their operations, supply chains and the products and services they deliver (Wolff et al., 2017b).
- 2 business activities are *dependent on services provided by ecosystems*, such as natural water purification (e.g. water industry), soil erosion regulation (e.g. agriculture), material and food provision (e.g. forestry and fishery), aesthetic quality (e.g. tourism).
- 3 business activities *contribute to strengthen biodiversity resilience* through the provision of services to ecosystems (ecological engineering, depollution activities...).

In the first case, companies are expected to mitigate their impacts on biodiversity. Stakeholders, and notably NGOs, may pressure companies to go beyond regulatory compliance if they consider that ecosystems are threatened by corporate activities. Stakeholders can then either take an adversarial approach (i.e. expert coercive forces such as shame campaigns) or a cooperative approach by offering technical support to the firm or reward for compliance (Lyon and Maxwell, 2008). In the second case, a company has a direct incentive (its economic viability) to

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