

# Investigation of Corporate Social Responsibility in Multi-National Companies to Promote Environmental Sustainability

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**Abstract:** In the present age of globalization, the contribution of MNCs and a socially responsible corporate governance is inevitable for achieving the United Nations - Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) by 2030. Hence, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is proliferating as a crucial element on national and transnational policy agendas. With reference to this context, companies are adopting critical strategies in their core operations and policies, to be more accountable for their impacts on the planet and society. Further, owing to the increase in environmental awareness around the globe, the strategies adopted as part of the CSR are mainly concentrating on greater environmental protection. However, there is minimal research related to corporate environmental responsibility, mainly focusing on achieving the UN-SDGs. This paper aims to investigate the role of CSR in Multi-National Companies (MNCs) to achieve UN agenda targeted to improve environmental sustainability. Thus, this interdisciplinary research bridges the knowledge gaps between CSR and environmental sustainability, providing a potential solution for the pressing environmental problems faced by policymakers and scientific communities.

**Keywords:** Corporate Social Responsibility; Energy Efficiency; Environmental Initiatives; Environmental Sustainability; Sustainable businesses.

## Introduction

The world Governments started to share their solidarity with the United Nations in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by setting country-specific Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs). Nevertheless, in the present age of globalization, the contribution of Multi-National Companies (MNCs) and a socially responsible corporate governance is inevitable for achieving the aforesaid targets by 2030. Hence, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a concept for the future viability of society, which integrates the social, environmental and economic goals within a single framework, is recognized as an effective tool for achieving the UN-SDGs. With reference to this context, companies are adopting critical strategies in their core operations and policies, to be more accountable for their impacts on the planet and society. Further, owing to the increase in environmental awareness around the globe, the strategies adopted as part of the CSR are mainly concentrating on greater environmental protection. Hence the integration of corporate environmental responsibility in the UN-SDGs is evolving as a significant and complex area of investigation. However, some links, particularly between CSR and environmental sustainability are not well explored (Wu, Liu, Chin, & Zhu, 2018). Consequently, there are very less kinds of literature available on the environmental initiatives, taken as a part of CSR in MNCs (Salzmann, Ionescu-somers, & Steger, 2005).

The main objective of the research is to explore the environmental dimension of CSR in the context of two UN-SDGs that concerns the environment, namely - responsible consumption and production, and climate action. This research aims to gain a broader understanding of CSR in MNCs through a case-study and provides a steep learning curve, where not only the researcher but also the company in question evolves its understanding of CSR concerning environmental challenges, its drivers, implementation and consequent difficulties. A qualitative interpretative case-study was conducted on the MNC by integrating staff questionnaires (collected through the face-to-face interview) and analyzing the available company data and documents. During the research process, various CSR initiatives within the company were observed – providing an opportunity to acquire insight on various initiatives that

maximized energy efficiency, eliminated waste and emissions, and contributed to solving environmental issues like global warming and destruction of biodiversity. In particular, the study will address the following research questions:

- 1) How does CSR in MNCs contribute to reducing the ecological footprint?
- 2) How effectively do the CSR initiatives comply with environment dimensions of UN-SDGs?

As suggested by Boote and Beile (2005), an extensive review of various kinds of literature is conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the research background and its related problems. This enabled the researcher to study deeply the concepts related to the United Nation's goals concerning the environment and the role of CSR to achieve them.

### Dimensions of CSR

The stakeholders, legal legislations, and the context in which business operates are continuously changing in the global scenario witnessing increased developmental activities (Dahlsrud, 2008). Hence, it is important to study the different dimensions of CSR that acts as a successful strategy for the businesses to map with the relevant context (ibid). As a result, Dahlsrud (2008) analyzed the frequency of commonly used CSR definitions and categorized them into five categories, namely environmental dimensions, social dimensions, economic dimensions, stakeholder dimensions and voluntariness dimensions (table 1).

**Table 1:** Dimensions of CSR; Source: (Dahlsrud, 2008)

Dimensions	Definition coded to the dimension	Example phrases
Environmental dimension	The natural environment	'a cleaner environment' 'environmental stewardship' 'environmental concerns in business operations'
Social dimension	The relationship between business and society	'contribute to a better society' 'integrate social concerns into their business operations'
Economic dimension	Socio-economic or financial aspects, including describing CSR in terms of a business operation	'contribute to economic development' 'preserving the profitability' 'business operations'
Stakeholder dimension	Stakeholders or stakeholder groups	'interactions with their stakeholders' 'how organizations interact with their employees, suppliers, customers and communities'
Voluntariness dimension	Actions not prescribed by law	'based on ethical values' 'beyond legal obligations' 'voluntary'

Calculating the dimension score for the frequently occurring definitions, Dahlsrud (2008) highlighted that the environmental dimension received a significantly lower dimension ratio than the other dimensions. He argues stating Carroll (1999) literature review, that the environmental dimension was not included in the early definitions. Hence, it can be inferred that the concern for environmental initiatives as part of CSR has been given less importance in the past. However, he claims that the engagement of CSR with environmental initiatives has been given spotlight after the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the importance is gradually increasing in recent times. On the basis of this, the research particularly focuses on the environment dimension of CSR and thus overarches the environmental initiatives at the case-study Company to clearly understand the contribution and effectiveness of the particular initiative in a broad context.

### Environmental Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, the 193 member states of the UN adopted an array of 17 global agenda to promote sustainability in the world, commonly termed as Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). These goals are derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Labor Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles, and Rights at Work, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (ibid). Hence, Strandenaes (2015) mentions the characteristics of the SDGs as universal, integrated, interlinked, indivisible, people-centered and planet-sensitive. Further, these goals are comprised of three dimensions, namely economic efficiency, social solidarity, and environmental sustainability (Ilic-Krstic, Ilic, & Avramović, 2018). Glaser (2012) emphasizes the importance of interlinking these dimensions to critically drive sustainable development goals.

Meanwhile, with the rising environmental awareness all over the globe, an increase in concern towards environmental issues such as pollution, land use, and energy conservation is becoming predominant (Lundmark, 2007). Protecting and sustainably utilizing the planet's ecosystem, such as rich soil, clean water, pure air and balanced climate, are the key factors to achieve equitable development (UNEP, 2013). Hence, there is a strong need to undertake initiatives to promote greater environmental responsibility and to understand this, it is critical to study the environmental dimensions of SDGs. This research mainly focuses on the context of two UN-SDGs with environmental dimensions, namely Climate Action and Responsible Consumption and Production.

### Role of CSR in MNCs to promote Environmental Sustainability

Given that MNCs operate globally among various stakeholder groups from different environments and cultures, they are responsible for the positive and negative impacts on the society (Rodriguez, Siegel, Hillman, & Eden, 2006). Meanwhile, in recent years, the world is experiencing a significant increase in environmental catastrophes mainly as a result of unscrupulous business practices and shift in the basic value and attitude in the society (Banytė, Brazionienė, & Gadeikienė, 2010). Hence, businesses are responsible for providing a precautionary approach to issues related to the environment. As a result of this, the Companies are actively seeking to integrate environmental CSR as its payback tool to mitigate the damages caused (Stojanović, Mihajlović, & Schulte, 2016). Various initiatives such as diffusing environment friendly behavior in the workplace (Nilsson, Bergquist, & Schultz, 2017), promoting eco-friendly products (Ramayah, Lee, & Mohamad, 2010) and motivating innovative strategies to mitigate the environmental problems (Ardito, Carrillo-Hermosilla, del Río, & Pontrandolfo, 2018) are critically adopted by the Companies as part of their holistic approach to embrace environmental protection.

### Materials and Methods

#### Qualitative Research Framework

Baxter and Jack (2008) argue that qualitative research focuses on understanding the nature of the research problem rather than quantifying the observed data. A systematic framework is developed in order to efficiently consider all the direct and indirect aspects underlying the activities of the organization. The flow diagram in figure 1 shows the relationship between the project aims and the methodology used.

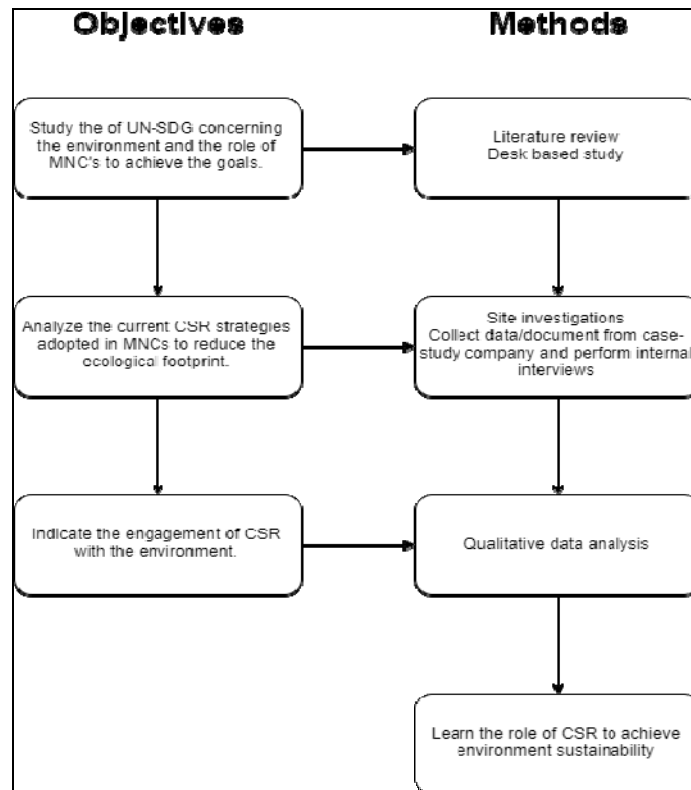


Figure 1: Research Framework, Source: the author

### **Primary data**

As suggested by Yin (2017), sources for primary data for the research are collected in the form of surveys, interviews, archival records, site investigations, direct observations, participant-observations and physical artifacts. In this case-study, primary research is conducted through interviews as well as site-visits in order to investigate and study the different CSR initiatives at the case study Company. Additionally, the views of employees from different departments, in relation to the research questions were collected, through face-to-face interviews. The interviews were based on the questionnaires, which facilitated to achieve successful results. Due to the unavailability of some of the interviewees at the time of site-visits, the questionnaires were passed to them and the answers for the questions were sent through emails to the Author.

### **Secondary Data**

As suggested by Yin (2017), sources for secondary data are collected from extensive literature review, reports, webpages and findings from similar case-studies in the field of CSR. Further, secondary data information available on the case-study Company's website is used to further enhance the credibility of findings from the research.

### **Desk Study**

The first stage of this project is to gather information and find the scope of the research through a desk-based study. Informal discussions were conducted with the CSR Manager of the case study Company to determine the terms of reference and scope of the research. Discussions were initiated with the management to determine the most feasible way of working together with the Company employees. Further, a desk study was undertaken to formulate the methods to answer the research questions and determine how to assess the current understanding of CSR at an employee and company level (Dul & Hak, 2007).

### **Site Investigations**

Frequent visit to the site was undertaken with the purpose of familiarizing the CSR activities of the case study Company as well as to build a good relationship with staff members in order to develop and facilitate cooperation during the interview (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). This created an opportunity for meeting and get introduced to interviewees prior to actual interviews, enabling to get in touch with the right respondents. The site-investigations also provided an opportunity to have a short discussion with the interviewees so that they are aware of the interview beforehand and several other site visits followed, to collect information and data through observation, talking to staff members and recording their opinions about packaging waste at the Company.

### **Design of checklist**

A checklist is designed to scope-in the potential CSR activities in the case-study company and prepare the interview questionnaires according to the departments (Mays & Pope, 1995). This checklist potentially identified the areas of CSR closely related to the activities in MNCs, particularly focusing on the case study Company, thus narrowing the interview questionnaire and scoping out the unwanted aspects. For example, the questions related to transport were screened out from the questionnaire because the checklist indicates there is no department of transport on the case site.

### **Questionnaire**

Since the case-study company was situated in close proximity, face-to-face interviews seemed as an appropriate method for data collection. The face-to-face interview provided an opportunity to gain the visual experiences of the MNC's operation, enabling to instantly understand and map the context of the response as part of the questionnaire (Mays & Pope, 1995). Separate questionnaires were prepared for interviewing employees from different departments. Each questionnaire was designed specifically for the expertise of the department. Totally, ten people were interviewed.

### **Internal Interviews**

The case-study Company's opinions and thoughts, in relation to the research questions, were observed with the help of semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews. The qualitative research interviews with the employees of the MNC helped to explore and understand the factual as well as meaning level information on how various operations are carried out responsibly in the case study Company (Mays and Pope, 1995). Therefore, the interviews were more like an exchange of views between the Author and the interviewee, conversing about the CSR activities, providing data about understandings, opinions, experiences, operations, activities and the like that the interviewee gained from work experience. The extensive literature review and the desk-based study have helped the Author to easily understand the context of the interviewee and relate it to the research questions.

## **Data Analysis**

As part of data analysis, the collected data sample is scrutinized, summarized and interpreted qualitatively and quantitatively to discover underlying causes, patterns, relationships, and trends. Qualitative analysis is adopted for a richer and more in-depth understanding of the CSR process and phenomenon (Maxwell, 2012). It is critical that till date, there is no extensive, qualitative case-study analysis on CSR initiatives in MNCs and its contribution to environmental sustainability aligned to particular UN-SDGs is studied, while thousands of other organizations are implementing CSR as a fundamental framework for sustainable development and excellence.

## **Analysis of the Questionnaire**

Data collected from various sources are analyzed and the corresponding inferences are derived to appropriately answer the two research questions. Data analysis facilitates interpretation of the meaning of the data through tables, charts, figures and other representations. Hence, this improves the efficiency of the research providing effective visualization and reflection of the data. In this research, most of the inferences are made by the Author based on the extensive literature review, site-investigations and analyzing the questionnaires. However, Microsoft Excel is used to analyze certain data collected from the case study Company. For example, charts are plotted to analyze the efficiency of two different lighting systems used in the case study Company. Therefore, in this research, the effectiveness and impacts of different CSR initiatives are analyzed efficiently.

## **Trustworthiness and reliability**

Merriam (1998) states that the common concerns of qualitative research are to achieve trustworthiness through its validity and reliability. Hence, it is important to explain how the data has been interpreted from the empirical material so that the reader can follow the Author's thoughts and critically examine the findings from the research. To achieve reliable data from the research, the questionnaires for the interview were created and sent to the supervisor to examine the relevance of the questions to the research. Then, a University professor from the learning enhancement team examined these interview questions and analyzed if they were clear and understandable. The questionnaires were sent in advance to the respondents in order to give them the time and opportunity to prepare. The interview was recorded using two recording devices to ensure that all information provided by the respondents are captured efficiently and it was possible to get back to the interview and listen to it again if needed. The interviews were conducted with experienced people of the relevant field in order to acquire great knowledge about CSR activities in a particular field. This also ensured that all the information collected are from a reliable source.

## **Case Study Background**

The case study is limited to a private limited, international service company that aims to combine commercial business operations with public service ethos. The Company is contracted to provide various administrative support services resulting in utilizing a wide range of resources to ensure the delivery of efficient and effective service. Hence the Company contributes to significant environmental and social effects. Therefore, it is critical for the case study Company to take CSR into account and provide a wider field of intervention to reduce environmental impacts. CSR activities pursued by the Company, benefitting the internal as well as the external stakeholders, contribute directly or indirectly to the seventeen principles of UN-SDGs.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Innovation and Environmental initiatives**

The case study Company is committed to responsible stewardship of the environment, specifically where its activities have the potential to affect the environment adversely. Interview with various coordinators, supervisors and managers of the Company reveal that the employees strive to identify and reduce the impacts on the environment, minimize the use of energy and other resources and reflect the principles of sustainable development in all its activities.

Following a University student's project related to food wastage reuse, the volume of food wasted is measured technically in the catering department of the Company. The inference from the project was a trigger to reconsider the way of storing food, after which, the catering department stopped using 'chilled' food and started using 'frozen' food. This helped to reduce food waste in the first instance and the viable benefits of the project influenced water savings, improved quality of food and land flooding avoidance. A similar project on the waste management system assessed the current state of recycling and provided recommendations to achieve waste minimization at the MNC. As a result, a sustainable waste management system is adopted in the Company resulting in fewer landfills.

Another significant environmental initiative by the MNC is the woodland pathway project, recommended by another University student, which aimed to design and construct a rural walk for staff and visitors with a picnic seating installed. Volunteers from City Council actively worked together with the Company to implement this project. This project highlighted the conservation potential of available corporate property, the barriers impeding biodiversity planning for business sites, and the potential for explicit guidelines to assist businesses interested in independently developing biodiversity management plans for their company site. As part of this project, insect ‘hotels’ have been created to encourage wildlife. Recently, the Company at the national level has benchmarked the approach to climate change by achieving a score of ‘B’ in the globally-recognized annual Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) climate change questionnaire. Hence the Company played a significant role in contributing to this result through various ‘carbon reduction’ initiatives.

### Energy Efficiency

The case study Company has ‘green purchased’ and installed Deciphering Digital Addressable Lighting Interface (DALI) lighting system whose environmental impacts have been assessed and found to be less damaging to the environment and human health when compared to competing products/services. The graph illustrates the energy usage in two departments of the MNC, one using the conventional lighting and the other using LED lighting, observed over a time period of 24 hours. Although, both lights showed almost the same trend in usage, the DALI lighting system consumed less energy when compared to conventional lighting. In an environment like an MNC, which operates 24/7, socially responsible activities such as the installation of the DALI lighting system contribute to a substantial reduction in operation cost.

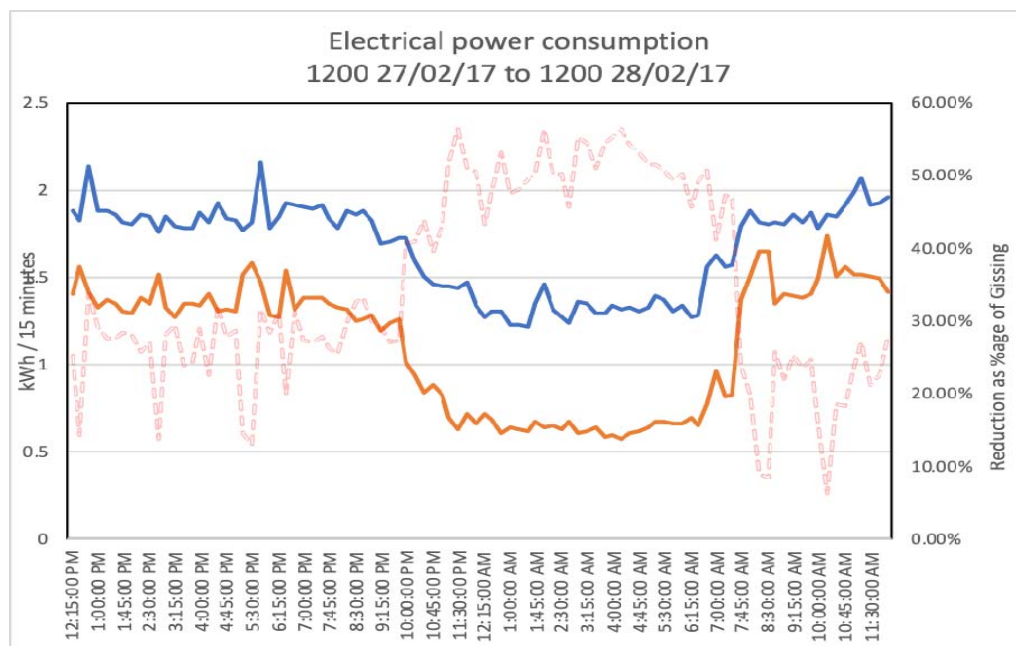


Figure 1: Electrical power consumption. Conventional lighting vs LED lighting system; Source: data collected through face-to-face interview

The data from two different wards installed with conventional lighting and LED lighting in each reveal that there were 49 jobs reported for conventional lighting systems and 18 jobs reported for LED lighting systems. Hence as depicted in figure 2, using the LED lighting systems has been proved to be efficient in the work environment and it brings the sustainability of resources used. Also, the number of reported jobs in the departments using LED lights are low when compared to the conventional lighting system, which makes the LED lights more sustainable and durable.

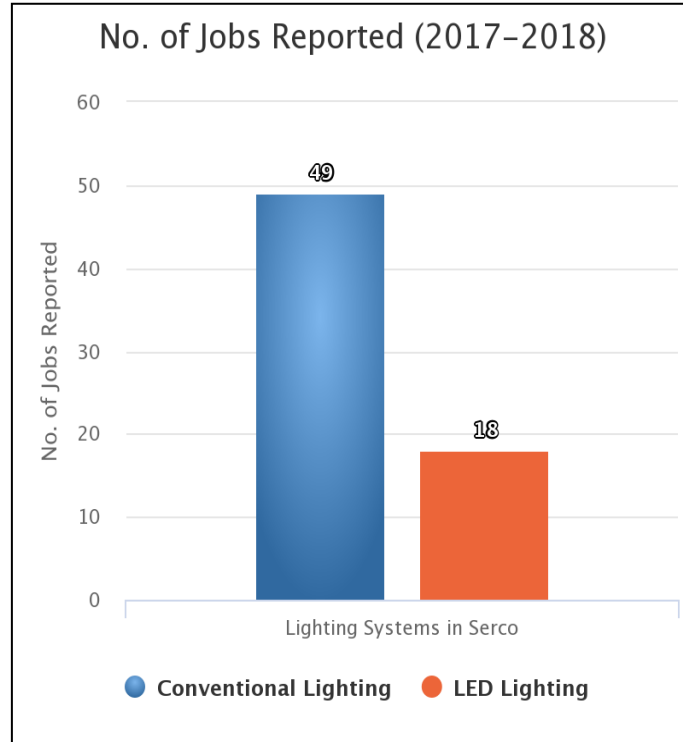


Figure2: Number of jobs reported. Conventional lighting vs LED lighting; Source: Data collected from face-to-face interview

On analyzing the casestudy, it is evident that CSR initiatives possess a huge impact on climate change as well as the global environment. Reducing the ecological footprint has been a main issue for the Company and it has been constantly engaging with environmental CSR initiatives. Following are the ways by which the casestudy company improved the environment and engaged with environmental sustainability. 1) Efficient waste management system by using color-coded bins. Additionally, a close watch of the weight of regulated medical waste generation and its disposition is made. This helps to track the waste disposal, which helps to formulate strategies to reduce the waste in the mere future. 2) Reduced consumption of energy by using energy-efficient lighting systems like the DALI. 3) Regulating natural resources efficiently. For example, treatment of water and testing it regularly for bacteria like legionella. 4) Reduced emission of hazardous substances by performing monthly waste monitoring. Using recycled and recyclable materials. 5) Training and encouraging the staff to look for additional ways to reduce the firm's environmental footprint.

By performing these activities, the case-study Company directly or indirectly contributes to reducing the carbon footprint, thus addressing the issues related to global warming. On the whole, it is inferred that the MNCs are now actively addressing the effect of climate change in their day-to-day operations. Following this, the physical infrastructure and the facilities are designed in such a way that the MNCs effectively contribute to achieving environmental sustainability.

### Waste Management

The casestudy Company facilitates efficient management of wastes produced by the MNC that may lead to public health hazards and environmental pollution. From the site investigations, it can be inferred that the employees working in the waste management department are aware that a better waste management not only minimizes the amount of waste but also ensures its safe disposal. Due to legal compliance and to prevent the release of hazardous waste into the environment, the casestudy Company uses color-coded clinical waste management system for ease of recognition and handling by producers and disposers. The Company also monitors the waste on a monthly basis to measure, track and reduce the release of waste into the environment (Forster, 2018).

## Responsible Business Operations

Well understood that performing the routine operations of the business with responsibility will directly or indirectly lead to environmental, social and economic benefits. The case study Company incorporates a number of activities within its business operations that creates awareness among the stakeholders of the Company. For example, employees of the case study Company send emails with energy facts along with their signature to create awareness about energy usage. Hence the Company fosters ethical considerations and strives to be a 'good' corporate citizen. As a result, all the initiatives within the Company have established good relations with the Government as well as the local communities, which eventually strengthened the supplier relationship, thus witnessing substantial stakeholder interest. Further, adhering to regulations and complying to the laws also inferred from responsible business operations of the Company. For example, the disposal of hazardous waste to minimize the environmental impacts is strictly adhered because of the need for legal compliance in the MNC.

In addition to reduced environmental impacts, good reputation leading to risk reduction and crisis management of the MNC, long-term sustainability for employees and improved financial performance are some of the factors driving the CSR initiatives in the MNC. Interestingly, from the analysis, it is inferred that all these factors are interconnected and possess a significant influence on each other. For example, legal compliance is the main driver of the waste management system. Whereas, efficient waste management system (say, segregation of waste) save money while reducing the negative impact on the environment, which eventually increases the stakeholder interest.

## Conclusion

Holistically, this article, through a qualitative case study, has briefly highlighted the nature and context of CSR to embrace environmental sustainability by critically measuring the Company's CSR performance. This research builds upon the existing literature on CSR and environmental sustainability in three aspects. First, this paper assesses the compliance of CSR initiatives with the environment dimensions of UN-SDGs. Various initiatives such as the installation of the DALI lighting system, waste management and other responsible business operations imply the Company's contribution towards the two UN-SDGs – Climate Action and Responsible Consumption and Production. Second, for environmental CSR literature, this paper enhances our perception of the correlation between CSR and innovation performance for providing a better social progress through various CSR initiatives studied as part of the case study. For instance, most of the CSR initiatives studied in the case study are proposed as a result of innovation and learning by the local University students that resulted in significant improvements in the local community. Finally, the findings indicate that there is an increasing awareness from the MNCs and their potential stakeholders of the need for and benefits of environmentally responsible behavior, which in turn will contribute to sustainable development. As a result, the companies are effectively continuing various CSR operations, thereby reducing its impact on the environment. Hence, this research bridges the knowledge gaps and provides fresh perspectives of CSR and environmental sustainability, and gears towards developing new data in this field.

## Future Research Implication

One of the riveting areas for future research includes exploration of other UN goals with environment dimensions. The two SDGs studied in this research are adopted purely based on the author's view and its relevance to the case study Company's initiatives. However, other SDGs such as affordable and clean energy, and sustainable cities and communities can be explored in future studies. Further, researchers can perform case-studies on how the role of CSR is perceived in the affordable and clean energy sector, how the nature of the work at these sectors itself serves as a social responsibility and how they contribute to sustainable cities and communities. Thus, the research will provide an interlinking relationship between sustainable development goals.

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