
Actions of university socio environmental responsibility

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Abstract: University socio-environmental responsibility is the manner through which universities relate with the environment and its stakeholders. The Gampe Group developed three distinct actions: Solidary Easter, Reading and Christmas. The projects were based on a research-action methodology as this community had been the focus of several research and extension projects. This initiative represents a mutual gain for the university and the society, since it humanises the teaching-learning process, boosts the social engagement of the student, generates a greater articulation with many segments of the society, and contextualises the academic knowledge. The communities of the semi-arid in Pernambuco are characterised as places with the lowest human development index in Brazil. The Gampe Group have been developing projects and actions which can empower this community in the endogenous processes of local development. In this sense, the present study aims to report the USR actions and to discuss the results stemming from those activities.

Keywords: environmental responsibility; university extension; rural area; poverty.

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1 Introduction

During the last decade, Brazil has witnessed an increase in the corporate interest for actions aimed at benefiting the societies, adopting a corporate social responsibility (CSR) posture. Subject of countless debates for some decades in the academic and corporate realms, the CSR theme is consolidating itself as part of the administrative plans. More recently, a change in the concept itself has been observed: from a concept based previously on charity and altruism, to one which links social responsibility and business strategy (Smith, 1994). By this way, voluntary participation is a crucial feature of CSR, and could be a consensus about the three main goals of social development: the human activities within the biosphere has to be ecologically sustainable, the distributing resources and property rights fairly, both within the current generation of humans and between this and future generations, and also between humans and other species and the efficiently allocating resources as constrained and including both marketed and non-marketed resources, especially ecosystem services (Daly, 1992). Then, is a close relationship between CSR and environmental sustainability, because the environmental concerns are inevitable factors of sustainable development. The whole world could be considerate a stakeholder and this raises issues on who should do what to combat environmental degradation (Gilman et al., 2007).

A series of changes regarding the role and the level of interference of the State in the economy and in the society has been unfolding in the global scenario. Along with the increase of the wealth generated by private companies, this fact has elicited many discussions regarding the role of private organisations in matters of public interest, pointing out the importance of acting in a socially responsible way (Serpa and Fourneau, 2007). CSR is a helpful conceptual framework for exploring the corporate attitude of companies towards stakeholders (Wheeler et al., 2002). Within this context, Federal Institutions, such as the public universities, have worked on behalf of the society through its activities, mainly developed with the participation of students and professors, contributing therefore to their social development.

Hence, social responsibility is not defined by actions realised only by the corporate sector, the term can currently be applied to actions carried out by other segments of

society to society itself, such as university social responsibility (USR) which is characterised as being the capacity that a university has to propagate and to put into practice the academic knowledge, through some processes such as management, teaching, research and extension, giving answers to the university community and to the country itself (Jiménez de La Jara et al., 2006).

Toldo (2002, p.82) defines social responsibility as:

“The permanent commitment of businessmen to adopt an ethical behavior and to contribute to the economic development, simultaneously improving the quality of life of their employees and their families, of the local community and of society as a whole.”

It is also possible to observe that the largest Brazilian companies publish social balance sheets in a similar number of those from larger multinational companies, which demonstrates its importance for corporate image before its stakeholders. The companies that publish the most are in the activity sectors that have the greatest impact on society and environment, such as oil, electricity and gas, but there are few records of universities with Social Responsibilities programs.

1.1 Corporate social responsibility

CSR is justified and defended by companies, society and State as a phenomenon that checks corporate actions. However, it is argued that instead of keeping their actions in check, social responsibility might end up extending corporate power, as pointed out by Schroeder and Schroeder (2004). Nonetheless, according to Volpon and Macedo-Soares (2007), the information goes on through social network.

Currently, with the event of new challenges, the arguments in favour of CSR actions can be ranked in the ethical and instrumental axis. The ethic arguments consider that it is the company's duty to carry out social actions because it is a morally correct attitude, aligned with important principles of the society wherein the company is inserted. The instrumental axis states that CSR is considered a way to yield competitive advantages to companies. But this kind of action goes beyond those two visions. It shows a real concern with the society in which the company is inserted, a need for greater articulation with emerging and urgent themes in the social sphere, humanising the companies (El-Deir et al., 2010a, 2010b).

According to Araújo (2006), the focus on social issues is currently a matter of survival. Social Responsibility reflects the urgency of incorporating into its mission, actions that aim the welfare of its employees and population. For, it is noticed that the organisation's growth depends on the society to which it belongs, and the members which are a part of it (Félix, 2003). For an organisation to be able to develop itself, it must be conscious of its actions, and of the needs of its surrounding (Vallaey, 2006).

In Brazil, another axis that has arise to enrich corporate actions is the Environmental Social Responsibility in the companies, a recent theme of growing interest in the social and corporate sectors, as well as the media, the academia, the government and the society as a whole. There are no strict rules which a company must follow to become socially responsible, but it involves a more transparent and ethical management, in which inserting social and environmental concerns in their business, results and decisions is vital for the company. Hence, CSR is also related with the way companies act, their impact on and relationship with the environment, and the ones rightfully concerned

(the so-called ‘stakeholders’), besides the social programs and this awareness among its employees regarding the outer world. All of that reflect corporate governance, as stated by Oliveira (2005).

All anthropic activities promote some social and environmental impacts, positive or negative. Around the world, businesses are being asking about the concept of CSR and environmental management has emerged as a very important issue for the business survival (Idowu and Towler, 2004; Quazi, 2003). CSR and environmental management practices predominantly from a large business perspective, because of the price to implement the ISO system and to mobilised resources to implement responsibility actions. There are major differences between management system in different sizes of companies (Redmond et al., 2008).

For Volpon and Macedo-Soares (2007), the CSR practices are becoming more and more important in companies, as a way to articulate them with society and generate more value for the stakeholders. In this context, the alliances between different corporations in distinct sectors, especially between large organisations and non-profit companies, are crucial tools to incorporate the social and environmental element in their market strategies. Socio-environmental alliances can be defined as forms of relationship between companies involving exchange, sharing or co-development of products, technology or services, with the goal of implementing policies and activities which include at least one non-profit partner and non-economical goals, that is, goals aimed at the social welfare improvement and the environmental preservation, in order to establish partnerships with areas of mutual interest. The CSR initiatives can help institutions, universities and governments to combine sustainable development actions, social responsibility approaches and environmental responsibilities. This is about how business and private initiatives take account of the triple bottom line of the sustainability, the economic, social and environmental aspects, trying to minimise impacts in the way it operates, maximising the benefits and to be worried about social and environmental conditions of the stakeholders, by voluntary actions (Anon, 2004).

1.2 University social responsibility

Vallaes (2006) observes that:

“The University Social Responsibility demands a holistic vision, which seeks to articulate several institutional areas in projects for the social promotion, with ethical principles of social development that are fair and sustainable, aiming at producing and transmitting responsible knowledge for the formation of equally responsible citizens.”

Jiménez de La Jara (2006) shows that the university’s task is aimed at forming people who are competent to build relationships of solidarity with the society to which they belong, thus strengthening their individual development, so that they can develop and have charitable autonomy, reasoning and consciousness. The justifications of the university activities comply with the promotion of human dignity. USR represents the connection between the university and the country’s reality, the latter with its antagonisms and poverty; where the USR attempts to establish order and balance between these two worlds (Wagenberg, 2006).

1.3 Characterisation of the community of the semi-arid in Pernambuco

Determining the socio-economical situation helps to comprehend the family formation, educational level and qualification of the activities developed in the traditional communities; besides combined evaluation of the aspects of the social organisation (Evangelista, 2000; Diegues, 2004). For Santos (2004) the acknowledgment of such peculiarities is fundamental [...] given that it allows a convergence of efforts between different social classes, where the understanding becomes important for local economic development. Such efforts, for El-Deir et al. (2006, 2009, 2010a) can occur by means of technological increment or public policies meant to that end, therefore strengthening the social organisation.

The Poço da Cruz community, object of this study, is located in the north of the Ibimirim municipality, belonging to the Meso-region of the Sertão of Pernambuco and Micro-region of the Sertão of Moxotó. According to the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística with data from the 2010 census (IBGE, 2011), the total area of the municipality is of 2,034 km² and it is located 337 km away from the capital of Pernambuco state. Ibimirim has a population of 26,959 inhabitants, and it currently has one of the lowest MHD (0.566) of the country. Internally, the community is informally subdivided into three areas: Commerce, Hospital and Mechanic. The Mechanic neighbourhood is a street, with adobe houses, without sanitation, unpaved streets, no sewage, running water or waste service. The Commerce neighbourhood, which has similar features to the Mechanic, has rammed earth and adobe houses. And the Hospital neighbourhood has a slight degree of organisation, running water and garbage service, a church, a health outpatient clinic and a school, but without pavement or sewage.

This community is located next to the Francisco Saboya dam, popularly known as Poço da Cruz dam. However, despite being next to this water reservoir, it suffers with a shortage of drinkable water for household consumption. Cavalcanti et al. (2010) reports that the water used by the Poço da Cruz community for domestic usage does not have adequate treatment, as observed in a study on the perception of the land owners on the purity of the water. That characterises the community in a scenario of water insecurity, lacking the means to analyse or ensure the quality of this resource.

It is believed that the community must be the focus of university extension activities and of concern of the municipal public power in order to develop sanitary education projects for the rural population. These must be added to water treatment techniques, as they are fundamental tools to diminish the risk of diseases related to inadequate treatment of the water destined to household consumption, providing a greater water security and improvement of the population's quality of life.

In this community, USR activities have been developed, in which the academic community has applied efforts to work relevant themes not only aiming the empowerment of the communities, but also providing a better comprehension of their local realities. However, these activities have had another approach regarding the insertion of community students who are committed with the local reality of the rural semi-arid and, particularly with the Poço da Cruz community, in Ibimirim – PE.

Due to these factors, the present article aims to discuss USR actions in the Ibimirim municipality, developed by the Environmental Management Group in Pernambuco – Gambe, of the Rural Department Technology - DTR, of the Rural University of Pernambuco – UFRPE.

2 Methodology

The present study is based on the research-action methodology. The techniques used in this research were of direct and participant observation, documental information and cataloguing of the participants' perception through individual interviews with key persons, developing knowledge construction processes, allied with diverse forms of collective actions.

One expects that these processes may facilitate the dialogue between technical and practical knowledge, besides, it is expected that these methodologies will reveal perceptions and conceptions about the environmental reality of the ecosystems used by the communities focused on this activity that is, constructing a scenario of the socio-environmental conditions.

3 Results and discussion

The present article deals with questions regarding USR, which entails the empowerment of rural communities and the process of constructing the eco-citizenship of students. In this sense, theoretical reflections were based on the academic praxis in the development of the activities of the rural community in the municipality of Ibimirim, in Pernambuco.

The USR project with the rural community was developed by the Gampe, which initially chose the site due to the fact that the region presents one of the lowest human development index (HDI) of the country. Three specific actions were structured: Solidarity Easter, Solidarity Reading and Solidarity Christmas. Being these formatted in four distinct modules:

- 1 planning
- 2 awareness-raising and collection
- 3 training
- 4 donation distribution.

During (1) planning, it was seen the need to develop strategic planning elements, searching a collective construction of the action and of the procedural steps. A leader for the process was chosen, necessarily a student, under orientation of a professor, who became responsible for all the project's necessary articulation, which counted with the participation of all the Gampe members. In this sense, leadership capacity was developed: in commanding the group; motivating people; demanding tasks; taking responsibilities regarding the needed tactics and operational outlining for the action's effectiveness and efficiency. Hence, it is aimed at improving the students' capacity with activities that surpass the academic realm.

The (2) awareness-raising process occurred through usage of media means, dialogue, flyers and banners, which aimed at bringing out the reality of the semi-arid rural area in Pernambuco, particularly the impoverished community object of the action, generating a potential increase in the willingness to carry out specific donations for each one of the actions. These donations were ordered in kits for individualised donation.

In the targeted community, the approximation process was done through (3) training, which is carried out through workshops, searching to empower the local social actors

about several emerging themes. Issues such as food and water safety, ethics, income generation, communitarian health and personal hygiene were some of the themes of the workshops. Thus, a discussion was sought with the community, concerning themes of their interest, and differentiating this action from a merely paternalistic act. In the last module of the project, (4) donation distribution took place.

The actions which have composed the project have distinct characteristics and purposes. During Solidarity Easter, the focus was underprivileged children and adolescents of the Poço da Cruz community and students of the public education system in the municipality. Workshops on personal hygiene and distribution of personal hygiene kits, along with the carrying out of entertaining activities to motivate them were some of the activities conducted. In the year 2010, 130 children were contemplated in two schools in Ibimirim, being one of them in the Poço da Cruz community.

The Solidarity Reading activity was structured aiming at creating and enriching the communitarian and school libraries, with the donation of didactic and paradidactic books, besides the realisation of interpretation, expression and reading workshops. This initiative also sought to raise the awareness of the external UFRPE public, through lectures with environmental themes that showed the reality of the studied community, in private schools of the Metropolitan Region of Recife. The result of this mobilisation was the gathering of 3,000 (three thousand) books (didactic and paradidactic) which were delivered in the schools.

Lastly, the final CSR action, Solidarity Christmas comprised workshops for adults about themes related to food and water safety; life quality and ethics; besides workshops about organic agriculture. During the execution of these workshops, an active participation and satisfaction of several of the participants was noticed, through questions and socialisation of popular knowledge. This moment of experience exchange was dynamic and took unimaginable proportions; as the participants were able to reinvent and recreate concepts. In this moment, it was possible to realise that most participants were women, as most men were working in the lands. Besides, some entertaining activities were developed with the children, exploring the motor and artistic abilities through origami workshops, drawing and games. Later, bags with donations were distributed, between those, basic food parcels.

The time span of each action did not overlap, which enabled a greater articulation between the students during all the processes involved in the actions.

4 Conclusions

The development of USR activities has aggregated value to the teaching-learning process of UFRPE, elevating the solidarity feeling in the academic community. And the possibility for a student to lead USR actions makes him/her feel more capable and tests his/her own limits, searching new strategies for realising new actions. For the professor coordinator, it is a special moment for motivating entrepreneurship among students who take risks to realise new actions. For the society, it represents a high gain to receive such actions from the university, because they provide contact with the population and the particular difficulties of rural communities in the semi-arid. Thus, it is believed that the actions with the Social Responsible profile must be fostered by Superior Education Institutions, due to all the positive aspects that they aggregate to the institutional image and to the learning-teaching process.

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