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## Editorial

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This special issue is a result of a selection of papers submitted and presented at the international conference organised in Pisa in April 2010 by Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna entitled ‘Exploring the link between CSR and competitiveness’.<sup>1</sup> The call for papers was sponsored by the *European Commission: Directorate General for Enterprise & Industry* and by *Global Compact – United Nations, Italian Network*. It resulted in a wide range of key contributions, presented by researchers and scholars from Italian and European

universities and research centres, all active in promoting research in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

The conference represented an occasion to share the results of the *COSMIC* project – ‘CSR oriented supply-chain management to improve competitiveness in the textile/clothing sector’. The project was co-financed by EC DG Enterprise & Industry within the programme ‘Responsible competitiveness: fostering corporate social responsibility in European industrial sectors’ and coordinated by Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna as lead partner.

The COSMIC project (<http://www.cosmic.sssup.it>) analysed the fashion supply-chain in order to determine the role played both by market forces (demand and supply) and by firms’ strategic stakeholders (local authorities and the banking system) in increasing the competitive performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that adopt CSR-related practices and strategies. The project focused on enterprises located in three Mediterranean countries: Italy, France and Spain. The results showed, on one hand, the existence of a manifold positive relationship between CSR strategies and competitiveness and, on the other, the low contribution and support of public actors and banks to this relationship.

Both the empirical results and the papers presented at the conference contributed to the current debate about the relationship between CSR and competitiveness, in order to spark further debate and present new evidence that consolidates previous research into this link. In recent years, in fact, literature in this field has increased significantly, covering extensive theoretical and empirical research on the benefits of CSR tools and practices, in terms of their effects on competitiveness.

Porter and Kramer (2006) state that “if corporations were to analyse their prospects for social responsibility using the same frameworks that guide their core business choices, they would discover that CSR can be much more than a cost, a constraint or a charitable deed – it can be a source of opportunity, innovation and competitive advantage”. In this context, recent studies have focused on several dimensions of competitiveness and the corresponding relationship of these dimensions with CSR. Firstly, proponents of CSR have tended to argue that responsible business behaviour can influence the *cost structure* of an enterprise, leading to cost savings. In practice, evidence shows that only some aspects of CSR strategies reduce costs (Welford, 2003), in particular those connected to environment-related CSR. In this case, initial investments tend to pay off in time, thanks to cost savings from a better and more rational management of natural resources, low potential mitigation expenditure, lower insurance costs and lower energy costs (Porter and Van der Linde, 1995; Miles and Covin, 2000). Moreover, management theory suggests that CSR can have a positive impact on *human resource performance*. According to Cochran (2007), a firm with good employee relations can lower its employee turnover rate and improve employee motivation. Additionally, good employee relations may be an important element to attract new staff members. Positive effects in terms of improved labour productivity have also been shown by Ansett (2007) and Perry and Towers (2009). Within human resource management, positive evidence has also emerged in the specific field of health and safety management. Past research demonstrates that programmes oriented to increase the health and safety of workers reduce absenteeism, reduce costs connected with injury management, and therefore have positive effects on productivity (Aldana, 2001; Busse and Bridger, 1997) and on competitiveness (Douphrate and Rosecrance, 2004). A relevant role in the CSR/competitiveness relationship analysis is played by the *customer perspective*. The

link between CSR and competitiveness from the customer perspective is highly dependent on the company's competitive strategy and market positioning. For some enterprises, especially those operating at the highest end of the market, CSR can be an integral part of the quality of products and services offered. Evidence of a positive relationship have been shown by Nicholls (2002), who stresses the relevance of a growing market for fair trade products in the UK; by D'Souza et al. (2007), who analyse the effects on customer satisfaction of green products; by Manaktola and Jauhari (2007), who show the relevance of increasing awareness among consumers regarding corporate engagement in CSR activities; and by Koszewska (2010), who demonstrates that CSR standards can be a significant factor for differentiating textile and clothing goods. Finally, Boehe and Barin-Cruz (2010) show how CSR can contribute to product differentiation in export markets and thus to improving export performance, while, more recently, Ben Brik et al. (2011) point out, in the context of an emerging economy (sample of enterprises in Dubai), that CSR has a synergetic effect on the impact of market orientation on business performance. Moreover, a relevant number of studies have argued that CSR can be a route to *innovation* through the use of social, environmental or sustainability drivers to create new business models, new products, services and processes and new market opportunities (Little, 2006). There would appear to be three main ways in which CSR can contribute to innovation capacity and performance: innovation resulting from engagement with other stakeholders (Buissey and Verbeke, 2003; Room and Jonker, 2006; Wagner, 2010), business opportunities through addressing societal challenges (Rennings et al., 2005; Rehfeld et al., 2006; Iraldo et al., 2009) and work places that are more conducive to innovation (Totterdill, 2004). Another determinant of competitiveness is *risk and reputation management*. The link between CSR and its potential to anticipate and reduced potential sources of business risk (strategic risk management) is well established. Heal (2005) suggests that effective CSR programmes can be a major benefit in terms of minimising or avoiding conflicts between companies, society and the environment. Graafland (2002) shows risk minimisation in business relationships along the supply chain; Orlitzky and Benjamin (2001) and Orlitzky et al. (2011) identify different kinds of business risks that CSR has the potential to reduce, such as governmental regulation, labour unrest, or environmental damage. The issue of regulatory risk is important in this context. Moreover, in a marketing perspective, CSR improves enterprise transparency, reputation and image, with positive effects on competitive potential (as argued by Turcotte, et al., 2007; Murillo and Lozano, 2009). The last determinant is related to *financial performance*. From this point of view, existing academic literature does not present common and univocal results. A positive impact has been demonstrated by Ziegler et al. (2007), Tsoutsoura (2004), and Husted and de Jesus Salazar (2006), while a negative or low impact has been demonstrated by Schröder (2007).

As shown by this framework of literature, the nature of the relationship between CSR and competitiveness is complex. As Vilanova et al. (2009) stress, "CSR and competitiveness relate through a learning and innovation cycle, where corporate values, policies and practices are permanently defined and re-defined". Thus, they propose "that learning takes place as CSR is embedded in business processes, and that once it has been integrated, in turn, it generates innovative practices, and finally, competitiveness".

A large part of the studies quoted above highlight the lack of a holistic connection between overall competitiveness performance and the implementation of CSR practices

and tools; a lack that Lankoski (2008) relates to the fact that a solid theoretical foundation of the relationship between CSR and competitiveness indicators is missing.

Moreover, the majority of research focuses on large enterprises, without taking into considerations the peculiarities of SMEs. SMEs represent 98% of total EU enterprises, produce about 57% of total EU Added Value and cover 66% of total EU employment (EC, 2007). These data show the relevance of these actors in the overall European context. Literature and research produced in recent decades have identified some common characteristics among SMEs, such as owner management, bureaucratic thinness and the necessity to solve day-to-day problems, high financial turnover, informal relations and communication characterising relationships amongst employees, high interrelation with the local community and local environment, frequent operation in a local network of SMEs and/or in a local supply chain or the supply network of a large enterprise (Murillo and Lozano, 2006; Lepoutre and Heene, 2006).

These characteristics underline a significant difference between large and small/medium firms, which is likely to be a reason why CSR policies adopted by SMEs are generally of an informal nature (i.e., Chiesi, 2005; Perrini et al., 2007; Russo and Tencati, 2009; Russo and Perrini, 2010). Moreover, the transition from informal to formalised CSR practices is often very difficult for SMEs, both in terms of perceived costs and the complexity of the operation, given their general lack of human, technical and organisational resources (EC, 2001, 2004; Luetkenhorst, 2004; Fox, 2005; Lepoutre and Heene, 2006). An investment in CSR is often considered hard and uncertain: hard because the enterprises need to locate resources; and uncertain because there is insufficient empirical evidence proving the benefits of social responsibility strategies. Moreover, small and medium enterprises perceive CSR as a complex business issue, which requires specific know-how.

These elements show how the relationship between CSR and competitiveness assumes a unique dimension in SMEs. Until today information emerging from the limited amount of research specifically related to CSR and competitive performance in SMEs shows that only some of the previously described determinants of competitiveness are affected by CSR strategies and practices.

In this perspective, many studies have highlighted the relevance of CSR strategies to productivity of human resources (Longo et al., 2005; Jenkins, 2006) and decrease of costs associated to retention and absenteeism (Kramer et al., 2007). Other positive evidences emerge in the field of the relationship between CSR and innovation, both in terms of processes of stakeholder engagement (Biondi et al., 2002; Mendibil et al., 2007; Battaglia et al., 2010; Von Weltzien Høivik and Shankar, 2011), and of opportunities addressed to societal challenges (Kramer et al., 2007). In the field of risk management, Fuller and Tian (2006) identify mitigation against risks to their reputation as a key driver for SMEs' CSR agendas, and they note that SMEs may act responsibly in order to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of immediate stakeholders (employees, customers, suppliers and their local community). Finally, in a supply-chain management perspective, recent studies have shown a positive co-relation between CSR and competitiveness in the SMEs involved (Ciliberti et al., 2008; Jenkins, 2009).

Moreover, the topic of CSR and its strategic role was recently re-launched by the European Commission in its communication 'A renewed EU strategy 2011–2014 for corporate social responsibility' (EC, 2011). The strategy gives a new definition of CSR, as "the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society", and stresses the relevance of collective agreements between social partners, as a prerequisite for meeting

that responsibility. After stressing the importance for enterprises to “have in place a process to integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations, and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders”, the communication refers explicitly to the relationship between CSR and competitiveness, and stresses how financial benefits linked to the implementation of CSR-related strategies are not fully perceived by enterprises, particularly in the short term and within small and medium enterprises. This link between CSR and competitiveness had already been analysed within the European Competitiveness report (EC, 2008), resulting in an overview of relevant topics characterising this relationship. In order to strengthen market incentives for CSR, EC (2011) states that “the EU should leverage policies in the field of consumption” (by revision of the Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan), ‘public procurement’ (promoting Socially Responsible Public Procurement practices) ‘and investment’ (addressing firms’ choices to invest in a more sustainable and profitable manner). This strategy shows the relevance that the relationship between CSR and competitiveness has assumed at EU level and, consequently, the need to promote further investigation into this argument in order to provide policy makers with input for strategic policies and initiatives.

This special issue has been prepared in the described framework, in order to contribute to the debate with a series of articles dealing with the issue from different points of view, using different methodologies and focusing on different CSR-related areas and competitive variables. The selection of papers was carried out by a triple blind review process in two steps, resulting in the final eight papers included in this issue.

The first article, by Apospori et al., offers a general framework both from a theoretical and applied point of view. On the basis of evidence emerging from an ongoing EU project, the article provides an overview of the literature addressing SME CSR behaviour and competitiveness, summarises the main trends emerging from the literature review and provides recommendations for further research. The second article, by Iasevoli and Massi, analyses the relationship between CSR and competitiveness in terms of innovation, economic performance and eco-efficiency. The paper is based on a theoretical, multidimensional scaling approach constituted by three semantic dimensions: operational, market and environmental. Daddi et al. focus on environmental-related CSR practices by investigating the presence of a co-relation between eco-innovation and competitiveness within industrial districts. The study shows that the connection between these two variables only exists in some cases and provided that certain conditions are verified. From districts to international, globalised supply – chains: Risso analyses the experience of four large companies that have planned to collaborate with competitors in order to define a common standard of compliance to CSR principles for their suppliers, thus reducing the costs of these practices. The relationship existing between CSR and innovation (both process and product) is analysed by Russo Spina and de Chiara, based on the role that can be played by stakeholder engagement processes. The result is the identification of innovative patterns of management that create opportunities for additional growth and sustainability among firm and networks. Ketola analyses, through an empirical study, the concept of ‘Fair Business’. The study examines the level of environmental, socio-cultural and economic responsibility of a small Finnish fashion design company, with the assistance of a five-step scale, and draws conclusions on the managerial implications of the *Fair Business* draft model. Tantaló et al. analyse the phenomenon of CSR within small and medium enterprises and its effects on competitive variables, following an empirical approach based on interviews with a sample of Italian

SMEs that have developed successful CSR strategies. Finally, Testa et al. present the results of a survey carried out in two Tuscan industrial clusters, with the aim of analysing the adoption of CSR initiatives by local SMEs in favour of employees, suppliers and consumers. The results clarify the role played by relationships amongst local actors involved in the cluster in stimulating and promoting CSR and evaluate the potential co-relation between the adoption of CSR initiatives and economic performance.

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### **Notes**

- 1 Only the paper by Apospori et al. wasn't presented at the conference, but it's the result of a research project carried out within the MED Programme (Responsible MED Project).