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Social and Environmental Accounting Research: The Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Achieving economic efficiency is a necessary, but not a singular, requirement of business sustainability. Stakeholders demand business organisations are socially and environmentally responsible, and balancing financial performance and corporate sustainability are considered a major challenge in today's economic environment. These challenges have triggered a growing interest in social and environmental research among academicians, governmental and professional bodies, and environmentalists. Numerous studies in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) have focused on the issues of corporate social reporting, but limited attention has been given to investigate the question of how social and environmental issues are managed internally. Moreover, most of the previous studies in this area are characterized as normative and descriptive, using quantitative research methods. This paper accentuates the importance of more engagement with practice in social and environmental accounting research, and provides a critical review of developments with specific emphasis on the field of management accounting.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, environmental accounting management control systems, social accounting

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Any remaining errors or omissions rest solely with the author(s) of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary business organisations operate in a society that expects them not only to fulfil economic functions by producing goods and services, but also to take on social and environmental roles and responsibilities (Panwar and Hansen, 2009). Balancing financial performance with corporate sustainability is a major challenge in today's economic environment (Busco *et al*., 2010; Rahardjo *et al*., 2013), and achieving these requires businesses to take on responsibilities known as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Jamali, 2006; Panwar *et al*., 2006).

The survival and development of organisations depends, scholars argue, on financial performance and operational efficiency, but alone these are not sufficient for businesses to reach their goal of ongoing growth. The responsibility of corporations is no longer perceived to be solely economic performance; organisations are now expected to take social and environmental responsibilities into account (Gordon, 1991; Jamali, 2006; Busco *et al*., 2010; Crutzen, 2012).

Recent years have witnessed increased research interest in corporate social responsibility and social and environmental accounting by academicians, governments, professional accounting bodies, environmentalists and other interested parties (Brown and Fraser, 2006). In accounting research, in particular, numerous studies in the field of CSR (for example, Gray *et al*., 1995; Deegan, 2002; Bebbington *et al*., 2008; Owen, 2008; Pedersen, 2010; Moser and Martin, 2012) have addressed the environmental dimension of CSR, with emphasis on CSR reporting (Mathews, 1997; Deegan, 2002; Gray, 2002; Parker, 2005; Durden, 2008; Owen, 2008; Riccaboni and Leone, 2010; Albelda, 2011). However, limited attention has been given to how social and environmental issues are managed internally (Norris and O'Dwyer, 2004; Durden, 2008; Riccaboni and Leone, 2010; Gond *et al*., 2012). What is known is that social reporting, as a discreet, independent function is not sufficient. Social and environmental dimensions need to be integrated into a company's management systems and decision making processes (Norris and O'Dwyer, 2004; Cresti, 2009; Riccaboni and Leone, 2010; Songini and Pistoni, 2012).

This paper aims to examine social and environmental accounting research in general, and in management accounting and control, in particular. An overview of the key developments in social and environmental accounting research (SEAR) are discussed, followed by a review of the prior studies in management control operations in relation to social and environmental issues. Additionally, this paper reveals insights and lessons learned from the existing studies, the challenges and corporate environmental and social responsibility initiatives. However, it is first important to provide a conceptualisation of CSR.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF CSR

The concept of CSR has evolved over a number of decades, during which social responsibility has been defined in a number of different ways (Carroll, 1979; Dahlsrud, 2008). It seems that the definitions for CSR revolve around Elkington's (1997) phrase of "the triple bottom line", whereby organisations integrate economic, social, and environmental considerations into the decision-making process. From a business approach, CSR has been defined by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) as:

> *The continuing commitment by businesses to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large.*
>
> *(Moir, 2001, p. 18)*

In terms of academic contributions to the definition, Carroll (1979) offered the following definition of CSR:

> *The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (or philanthropic) expectation that society has of organizations at a given point in time.*
>
> *(Carroll, 1979, p. 500)*

Carroll (1979, 1991) further explained that the definition of CSR is composed of the following four parts. First, economic considerations must be taken into account, in that business organisations have the responsibility to produce goods and services that are needed by the society and with the goal of making profit. Second, legal considerations must be taken into account. As a part of the "social contract" between business and society, business organisations must fulfil their economic responsibilities, provision of goods and services, within the legal requirements. Third, ethical responsibilities must be considered. Although, economic and legal responsibilities sometimes involve ethical norms in terms of fairness and justice, ethical responsibilities encompass those activities and practices that are expected or prohibited by society even though they are not stated by the law (Carroll, 1991). Thus, society expects business organisations to engage in activities that go beyond legal requirements. Lastly, discretionary or philanthropic activities should be undertaken, in that business organisations should engage in activities that are purely voluntary and not a legal requirement or business common sense. An example of a philanthropic activity includes a contribution of resources by a business organisation that improve the quality of life of the surrounding community.

In sum, these four parts of the CSR definition constitute a pyramid with economic responsibilities at the base and the philanthropic responsibilities at the top. Carroll (1991) concluded that these four parts or responsibilities are not mutually exclusive, and each responsibility needs to be fulfilled at the same time.

In this paper, the definition of CSR of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) is thought to be relevant since it is a result input from opinion leaders and practitioners from inside and outside business corporations (Chih *et al*., 2010). Moreover, in the context of this paper, the authors agree with Dahlsrud (2008) who argued that,

> *The challenge for business is not so much to define CSR, as it is to understand how CSR is socially constructed in a specific context and how to take this into account when business strategies are developed.*
>
> *(Dahlsrud, 2008, p. 6)*

A review and discussion of social and environmental accounting research (hereafter SEAR) development follow, which includes investigation of the issues researched, those that remain under researched, and the issues that require future research.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN SEAR

The growing interest in social and environmental issues among academicians, governmental and professional bodies, and environmentalists (Owen *et al*., 2001; Deegan, 2002; Hossain *et al*., 2012), has created an array of definitions of social and environmental accounting (SEA). Gray *et al*. (1987), as cited in Mathews (1997, p. 483) defined SEA as:

> *…the process of communicating the social and environmental effects of organizations' economic actions to particular interest groups within society and to society at large. As such it involves extending the accountability of organizations (particularly companies), beyond the traditional role of providing a financial account to the owners of capital, in particular, shareholders. Such*

an extension is predicated upon the assumption that companies do have wider responsibilities than simply to make money for their shareholders.

Social responsibility accounting has also been defined by Mathews (1993) as:

> *Voluntary disclosures of information, both qualitative and quantitative made by organizations to inform or influence a range of audiences. The quantitative disclosures may be in financial or non-financial terms.*
>
> *(Mathews, 1993, p. 64)*

Based on these definitions, there does not seem to be any clear agreement concerning the definition of social and environmental accounting (Owen, 2008). Differences occur on whether voluntary or compulsory disclosures are required, and whether disclosures must be in quantitative or qualitative forms (Mathews, 1997). In addition, these definitions were restricted to the disclosure of corporate social reporting. However, a broader concept of SEA includes other accounting areas, not just corporate reporting, suggested Gray and Bebbington (2001, p. 7) as:

> *…it can be taken as covering all areas of accounting that may be affected by the business response to environmental issues, including new areas of eco-accounting.*

SEAR first started to emerge as a substantial discipline in the early 1970s (Owen, 2008), and research published in this period was largely descriptive empirical work (see for example, Grojer and Stark, 1977; Anderson, 1980; Belkaoui, 1980). However, a number of researchers attempted to develop and explain normative models designed to improve social and environmental accounting disclosure practices (see for instance, Estes, 1976; Ramanathan, 1976; Ullmann, 1976). During this period, social and environmental accounting literature was characterised as theoretically underdeveloped, and few researchers attempted to investigate what motivates corporations to make such disclosures (see for example, Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Ullman, 1985).

During the '80s and early '90s, researchers conducted more analytical empirical research in SEAR, compared with the descriptive research that dominated the preceding period. Moreover, Owen (2008) and Campbell (2007) noted that researchers started to pay greater attention to the methodological and theoretical perspectives. For instance, some researchers employed content analysis as an analytical tool for their studies (Owen, 2008), while others adopted theoretical perspectives, drawn from the stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, institutional theory, and other political economy theories, with the aim of explaining, rather than simply describing SEA practices (Owen, 2008; Hossain and Rowe, 2011). Furthermore, in this period, attention was also given to what was perceived by some critical researchers as shortcomings in the emergent SEAR (Mathews, 1997). This critical view was further elaborated by Mathews (1997), as follows:

> *Writers in the field of critical theory have noted that the new developments do not often challenge the status quo, in that considerable attention is devoted to reporting what is disclosed, but not to actions which could change the underlying system.*
>
> *(Mathews, 1997, p. 500)*

From 1991 to 1995, research focused on environmental and auditing issues, which represent further additional developments in SEAR (see for example, Gray, 1992). In addition, from the mid-1990s onwards, new issues emerged, such as eco-justice, eco-efficiency, sustainability, and triple bottom line reporting, started to become issues of key concern (Owen, 2008; Hossain *et al*., 2012).

Later in the development of SEAR, some researchers called for more engagement with SEAR practice, largely as a result of the limited application of case studies in this area (Durden, 2008; Owen, 2008), (see for example, Gray, 2002; Parker, 2005; and Adams and Larrinaga-Gonzalez, 2007). For instance, Gray (2002, p. 698) argued that "If social accounting is anything, it is the opening up of new spaces, of new accountings, not simply reacting to old ones. The project seeks engagement and the changing of practice."

Likewise, Parker (2005) also supported the need for more empirical and field research in the area of SEA. He argued researchers' engagement in the field was to be achieved through case studies and qualitative research. In response to these calls, case and field-based research methods became increasingly used (see for example, Norris and O'Dwyer, 2004; O'Dwyer, 2005; Solomon and Darby, 2005; Durden, 2008; Riccaboni and Leone, 2010).

A number of researchers and scholars have reviewed social and environmental accounting research (see for example, Mathews, 1997; Deegan, 2002; Owen, 2008), with Deegan (2002) providing a comprehensive overview of a number of research questions and issues in social and environmental accounting. The research focus can be summarized into four groups.

The first research group of research in the area of social and environmental accounting heavily concentrated on corporate social reporting, what companies are reporting with some emphasis on international comparisons. For example, Guthrie and Parker (1990) published a comparative analysis study of corporate social disclosure practices in the UK, USA, and Australia. Likewise, Harte and Owen (1991) examined environmental disclosure in the annual reports of British companies in the 1980s. They found that companies tended to report little and sometimes there was no information about social and environmental activities in annual reports beyond that demanded by the statutes. Moreover, the information disclosed tended to be linked to the goal of the company to improve its image, that is, the company was keen to be environmentally aware rather than representing a commitment to the concept of public accountability. These studies revealed that social and environmental reporting varies according to a number of factors, such as the size of the reporting company, country, and possibly by culture (see for example, Ullmann, 1985; Adams *et al*., 1998; Newson and Deegan, 2002).

Researchers in this group also examined the attitudes of accountants, investors, and other stakeholders to social and environmental reporting, managerial motivations for disclosure, the relationship between corporate social and environmental disclosure and organizational performance, and other factors, such as industry, country of origin and culture, or size. For instance, researchers linked the type and motivation of social reporting to various reasons; legitimacy or threatening events (for example, major social or environmental incidents, major media campaigns, or successful environmental prosecutions); information required by powerful stakeholders; or, other institutional pressures (see for example, Deegan and Rankin, 1997; Adams *et al*., 1998). Even though the studies were based on extensive body of literature on the relationships between social and environmental disclosure and corporate performance (economic performance as an example), the resulting findings were inconsistent. Reasons for the inconsistencies are a lack of theory underpinning the literature (Ullmann, 1985; Gray, 2007), and the variety of study methodologies, contexts and contingent factors, such as type of industry, size, and country of origin (culture).

The second group of social and environmental accounting research focuses on theoretical perspectives used to explain how companies report their social and environmental information (see for example, Ramanathan, 1976; Gray *et al*., 1996; Lehman, 1999; Deegan, 2000; Mathews, 1993, 2000). For instance, rather than describe the social and environmental practices organisations implement in response to pressure and expectations from different stakeholder groups, many researchers employed theories, such as legitimacy theory, institutional theory and stakeholder theory, as an explanatory basis (Deegan, 2002; Owen, 2008). Some researchers even called for using multiple theories, which further complicated study findings:

> *… because there is a deal of overlap between a number of theories, and because the theories can provide slightly different and useful insights, there has been a move by some researchers to use more than one theory to provide an explanation for particular managerial actions.*
>
> *(Deegan, 2002, p. 294)*

Such a strategy was not broadly supported, as other researchers believed a better approach was to focus on one particular theory (Alvesson, 1996; Dobson, 1999; Hopper and Major, 2007).

The third research group relates to the field of accounting education, and whether schools, universities or professional bodies look at corporate social and environmental responsibilities. Researchers also examined the challenges and constraints of incorporating social and environmental issues into curriculums and accounting education programmes (see for example, Gray *et al*., 1994; Gibson, 1997; Gordon, 1998).

The fourth body of research deals with the incorporation of social and environmental issues into management accounting and control systems. Even though a large and varied body of social and environmental research exists, much of this research focuses on corporate social reporting (Deegan, 2002) without addressing how social and environmental issues are managed and operationalised internally, or detailing how these issues are incorporated into management accounting and control systems.

If corporations are to adequately address social and environmental issues through a holistic decision-making process, research on the integration of social responsibilities into management control system (MCS) is vital (Norris and O'Dwyer, 2004). The following sections discuss the design and operation of MCS that incorporate social and environmental issues.

PRIOR RESEARCH OF MANAGEMENT CONTROL SYSTEMS IN RELATION TO SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Early studies in environmental management accounting, such as Ditz *et al*. (1995), Milne (1991, 1996), Bennett and James (1997, 1998), recognised that environmental and social costs existed in traditional accounting systems but they were assumed to be unimportant and thus hidden as overhead expenses (Bennett and James, 1998). Ditz *et al*. (1995) explained that even though some business executives were aware of environmental issues, they failed to address questions such as "What are the company's environmental and social costs? How large are these costs? Where do these costs arise within the company? How can these costs be better managed?" (pp. 3-4). Similarly, Milne (1991) noted that recognition of the impact of corporate activities on the physical environment did not translate into expanding internal accounting systems to integrate social and environmental impacts. According to Milne (1991), the lack of research in this area may be assigned to either the lack of ethical concerns of corporate responsibility among organisations (in particular private sector organisations), or the methodological problems associated with measuring social costs and benefits:

> *The growing body of literature in business ethics generally supports the expansion of corporate responsibility. Further, developments in applied microeconomics are overcoming many of the practical problems of social cost and benefit measurement.*
>
> *(Milne, 1991, p. 83)*

Milne (1991, 1996) concluded that management accounting should clearly recognise and reflect the demand for environmental matters to be included in corporate decision-making. If management accounting fails to include social and environmental costs, it also fails to enable an informed managerial decision-making process. Bouma and van der Veen (2002) suggested the fault lies with the lack of tools to embrace social and environmental issues in the management accounting systems.

In the last decade, researchers claimed different frameworks and concepts could integrate social responsibility and stakeholder interests into MCS or performance measurement systems (Rouse and Putterill, 2003; Norris and O'Dwyer, 2004; Lamberton, 2005; Durden, 2008; Riccaboni and Leone, 2010; Arroyo, 2012; Gond *et al*., 2012; Rahardjo *et al*., 2013; Rodrigue *et al*., 2013).

For instance, Durden's (2008) investigation of measurement and monitoring of social responsibility within the MCS of a small privately owned New Zealand manufacturing company showed that by disseminating a triple bottom line (TBL) report to the public, the company strengthened its stakeholder and social responsibility image. This company was chosen by Durden for its strong visionary management and leadership in social responsibility and social accounting practices.

Based on a normative strand of stakeholder theory, Durden (2008) argued that an organisation's MCS can meet the interests of its various stakeholders as well to help it to operate in a socially responsible way. A model of a "socially responsible MCS" proposed by the author incorporated both formal control and informal controls, and were highlighted as key aspects to successfully account for social responsibility in an MCS. The author concluded that organisations need an MCS that reflects their social responsibilities and also provide social accounting information to the public.

In another study, Norris and O'Dwyer (2004) contributed to the growing literature on corporate social performance by exploring the internal motivators that drive socially responsive decision-making in an organisation that publicly promotes its commitment to social responsibility. Based on a United Kingdom company with audited and published social reports, their study sought the opinion of managers concerning on how different forms of management control influenced their actions and decisions. They found that socially responsible outcomes were not formally measured, but informal controls were the dominant influence in inculcating socially responsive decision-making inside the company. Both Durden (2008) and Norris and O'Dwyer (2004) concluded that socially responsible outcomes of the organisations were not measured in their formal MCS, those systems only focused on the achievement of traditional financial objectives.

In an effort to move the performance measurement debate forward, Rouse and Putterill (2003) examined the role and use of performance measurement to meet the needs of contemporary business organisations. The authors proposed a performance measurement framework that maintained an internal accounting focus on stakeholder interests and expectations. In addition, the framework emphasized the importance of both macro and micro perspectives in relation to the performance measurement required by stakeholders (Durden, 2008, p. 675):

> *…from a micro perspective, appropriate management controls would need to be in place to help managers ensure that a business was operating in accordance with stakeholder expectations… This implies that the role of the MCS should be considered in relation to providing information to managers that can be used to help assess impacts on stakeholders.*

Rouse and Putterill (2003) also stressed that performance measurement systems must emphasize goals and stakeholder expectations.

By reviewing the relatively short history of sustainability accounting, Lamberton (2005) developed a sustainability accounting framework. The primary objective of this framework was to measure organisational sustainability performance, and it proposed the provision of relevant information to stakeholders, using internal (micro) and external (macro) perspectives:

> *The provision of sustainability accounting information to internal users would focus on the provision of relevant and decision useful information to management. For example, an array of performance indicators and lifecycle data compared to relevant sustainability targets would assist the internal management of the organisation toward the multidimensional sustainability objective.*
>
> *(Lamberton, 2005, p. 19)*

A recent, empirical case study by Riccaboni and Leone (2010) investigated the role of MCS in implementing sustainable strategies within Procter and Gamble, a large multinational consumer goods company. The authors called for a broader approach to move beyond the dominance of corporate social reporting in sustainability research:

> *Social reporting is not enough since environmental and social profiles should be incorporated within the planning process, policy decisions, and capital allocation and performance evaluation.*
>
> *(Riccaboni and Leone, 2010, p. 131)*

Riccaboni and Leone (2010) reported that MCS have the potential to embrace organisations' sustainability strategies if formal MCS (such as performance measurement system and rewarding systems) and informal elements (such as corporate culture, sense of ownership, and leadership commitment) are linked together. Similarly, Arroyo (2012) proposed a conceptual framework for organisations that seek to change from traditional management accounting to sustainable management accounting (SMA). The SMA conceptual framework, defined as "the generation, analysis and use of financial and non-financial information to optimize corporate environmental, social, and economic performance and to achieve sustainable business" (p. 288), utilized an institutional approach to examine management accounting change with respect to sustainability issues and concerns.

Additionally, Rahardjo *et al*. (2013) developed the concept of corporate sustainability management to balance organisations' financial, social and environmental performance. They proposed five factors, including (1) the commitment of shareholders to encourage management engagement in solving social and environment issues; (2) the strength of humanist paradigm adopted by the management; (3) the ability of management to achieve higher-level sustainability performance; (4) the ability of management to build and run a strong sustainability culture that reflects the principles of sustainability; and (5) the ability of management to build a mutually beneficial collaboration with the economic stakeholders.

An organisational configuration framework, based on Simons' (1995) levers of control, was developed by Gond *et al*. (2012) to explain the roles and uses of management control systems (MCSs) and sustainability control systems (SCSs) in integrating sustainability into organisational strategy. The authors suggested interactive use of these systems, and distinguished two types of configurations: low levels and high levels of integration. Finally, and similar to Gond *et al*. (2012), Rodrgue *et al*. (2013) also built on Simons' levers of control to examine how stakeholders' influence impacted managers' choice of internal environmental performance indicators in a proactive environmentally multinational firm. The authors argued the main drivers were a firm's environmental impact on stakeholders and its need to secure organisational legitimacy.

Despite existing research on the link between MCS and social and environmental issues, little is known about the lack of integration and/or ceremonialisation of social and environmental issues in the MCS of organisations, why organizations show little interest in integrating sustainability issues in their MCS, and stakeholder influence on the development of MCS. In addition, almost all of these social and environmental accounting practices have been examined in developed countries (Rowe and Wehrmeyer, 2001; Lodhia, 2003; Belal and Owen, 2007; Hossain and Rowe, 2011; Yang, 2011; Hossain *et al*., 2012). Therefore, research in developing countries is needed because of the vast differences in economic development, expertise, culture, and technology could influence social and environmental accounting practices (Hossain and Rowe, 2011; Yang, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes with the following points. First, for organisations to survive and develop, scholars argue that achieving economic efficiency is a necessary, but not singular, indicator of business sustainability. The sole responsibility of corporations is now broader than economic-based performance; organisations are now required to be socially and environmentally responsible. Second, is the increasing interest in social and environmental accounting research. However, much of this research focuses on the issues of corporate social reporting, with limited attention given to the question of how social and environmental issues are managed internally. Thus, the investigation of social and environmental practices in relation to MCS dimensions is limited and is an under researched area (Milne, 1991; Parker, 2005; Owen, 2008; Berry *et al*., 2009). Third, within the development of SEAR, several scholars stressed the relative dearth of case/field research and, in response to that call (see Gray, 2002; Parker, 2005; and Adams and Larrinaga-Gonzalez, 2007), case- and field-based research methods have increased. Finally, the literature reveals that almost all the prior studies on social and environmental accounting practices have occurred in developed countries, with limited investigation occurring in developing countries. As such, research that examines environmental and social accounting practices in developing countries is important because it is unclear whether the differences in economic development, expertise, culture and technology impact social and environmental accounting practices.

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