

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) REPORTING BY CONSTRUCTION FIRMS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Businesses nowadays are facing the challenge of dealing with society's expectations who are becoming more aware on the environmental and social risks associated with economic development. Thus, a growing number of business entities are realising the benefits of reporting on their corporate social responsibility activities to the stakeholders and community. There have been a number of academic literatures charting the extent to which companies report on their CSR agenda in some specific sectors but such is not the case for the construction industry. With regards to the Malaysian context, limited studies have been conducted so far on the practice of CSR reporting by construction companies. Hence, through a review of CSR reports by construction companies listed in the Main Board of Bursa Malaysia (BM) and BM's CSR Framework, this study seeks to analyse the general CSR reporting trend within the Malaysian construction industry, identify gaps between the reports and the framework by BM and determine the extent to which companies are practicing CSR within their organizations. Findings suggest that the extent of CSR reporting can vary significantly across the industry and that companies emphasis more on Community Involvement in their CSR report compared to other areas. Some of the possible drivers behind CSR practice and reporting in the Malaysian construction sector will also be identified.*

Keywords: *Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR reporting, construction industry, Malaysia.*

Introduction

Businesses nowadays are facing the challenge of dealing with society's expectations who are becoming more aware on the environmental and social risks associated with economic development. Thus, a growing number of business entities are realising the benefits of reporting on their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to the stakeholders and community. The main purpose of CSR reporting is to inform stakeholders of a company's environmental, social and economic performance and consequently, it is often used as a means of measuring a company's progress towards sustainability (CSR, 2004).

Over the last four decades, there has been a growing level of interest on CSR in construction, both in academic and the business world, owing to the complexity of construction projects and their impacts on society and the environment (Zhang et al., 2021). Studies on CSR in the context of construction management are relatively recent compared with CSR studies in other mainstream developments (Loosemore et al., 2018). Some of the more recent CSR studies in the construction industry include that of Jiang et al. (2016) in which key CSR practices and areas are examined; Liao et al. (2018) who researched on CSR communication and reporting by international contractors; Ye et al. (2019) research on CSR 'globalisation'; and the 2020 research on CSR practices by leading construction contractors by Zhang et al. (2021).

In Malaysia, several researches have been conducted on CSR practice but very few has been conducted on CSR reporting by companies within the construction industry. Hence, through a review of 26 CSR reports by construction companies listed in the Main Board of Bursa Malaysia (BM) and BM's CSR Framework (now revised as the new Sustainability Framework, 2015), this study seeks to analyse the general CSR reporting trend within the Malaysian construction industry, identify gaps between the reports and the framework by BM and determine the extent to which companies are practicing CSR within their organizations. Also, based on the findings from this research, some of the possible drivers behind CSR practice and reporting in the Malaysian construction sector will also be identified.

Literature Review

CSR is a relatively recent, but rapidly expanding high-profile phenomenon that influences organisations to consider the impact that their working practices have on the environment and society (Aslaksen et al., 2021). To date, there has been no commonly agreed definition on the term corporate social responsibility. Various organisations applied the concept of CSR in ways that are different from one another to suit their own particular perspectives and agendas. To obtain clarity on the definition of the term, it is useful to compare some of the definitions provided by previous researchers and / or organisations.

Definition of Corporate Social Responsibility

As defined by Bursa Malaysia, CSR is a company's commitment to operating in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner whilst balancing the interests of diverse stakeholders (Bursa, 2008). Meanwhile, Moir (2001) defines CSR as the continuing commitment by businesses to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large.

The UK Government sees CSR as "the business contribution to the country's sustainable development goals. Essentially it is about how business takes account of its economic, social, and environmental impacts in the way it operates. – maximising the benefits and minimising

the downsides. Specifically, the Government sees CSR as the voluntary actions that business can take, over and above compliance with minimum legal requirements, to address both its own competitive interests and the interests of wider society” (csr.gov.uk, 2007).

Other definitions on the term include being the commitment to integrate socially responsible values and concerns of stakeholders into their operations in a manner that fulfils and exceeds current legal and commercial expectations (Constructing Excellence, 2004). CIRIA (2004) also defines CSR in the same way. The ISO 26000 defined CSR as an organisation’s responsibility for the impacts of its decisions and activities on the environment and society, through transparent and ethical behaviour that contributes to sustainable development, takes into account stakeholders’ expectations, is compliant to the applicable law and integrates with the entire organisation (ISO, 2010).

Although each definition has its own emphasis on the term, the themes underlying the concept of CSR are all common and clearly stated. For instance, all definitions allude to the need to respect stakeholders’ needs and interests, the need of being aware of the environmental, social and economic impacts as well as emphasis on the alignment of business objectives with societal goals.

CSR in the Construction Industry: Drivers for CSR Practice

Construction analysts and researchers believe that companies which pay attention to CSR issues and supply good CSR policy in meeting the demand of their stakeholders will have the advantage of winning contracts and good favour. Likewise, ignorance on CSR would be detrimental for a company in the long-term (Zhang et al., 2021). The implementation of CSR policy offers business benefits through risk reduction, value enhancement, staff efficiency, morale improvement and opportunities to win construction contracts (DTI, 2002).

From a business viewpoint, researchers argue that CSR can improve company’s competitiveness (Weber, 2008) which suggests a positive link between CSR practice and economic performance (Lu et al., 2018). However, there may be several other drivers which influence companies to practice and disclose their CSR activities (Mellahi et al., 2016). In a survey done by KPMG in 2005 for instance, companies were asked to list the drivers behind their CSR activities which are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: KPMG (2005) Survey Results on Drivers for CSR Activities.

Driver	% of companies listing the driver
Economic considerations	74
Ethical considerations	53
Innovation and learning	53
Employee motivation	47
Risk management or reduction	47
Access to capital / increased stakeholder value	39
Reputation or brand	27
Market position (Market share) improvement	21
Strengthened supplier relationships	13
Cost savings	9
Improved relationships with governmental authorities	9
Other drivers	11

Source: KPMG, 2005

From the results of the KPMG survey, it appears that although economic gain is the most predominant reason for companies to be practising CSR, there are many ways in which this could be achieved. Siltaoja (2006) for instance suggested that there is a connection between CSR and reputation and that it is reasonable to assume that a company with better reputation than its competitors is likely to be more successful. For most companies within the construction industry, reputation is a crucial factor to ensure company's success. Such reputation will be judged on several levels; within the industry, by clients, by direct competitors, and within community. Hence, since CSR takes into account the interests of every stakeholder within the industry, practising CSR would be an increasingly effective way for improving and enhancing the reputation of a construction company (Herridge, 2003).

Another element that can influence the reputation of a company is community relations. This area can be considerably enhanced and improved upon with the implementation of CSR policy. According to Herridge (2003), a company that keeps on good terms with the community in which it operates will have clear business benefits. This is because, building healthy relationships with the community enables the day-to-day functioning of the site to run smoothly and eliminates the risk of project delay. Moreover, generating mutual understanding with the community would prevent complaints and bad feeling thus contributes to meeting deadlines more quickly and less hustle.

Also, CSR helps improve staff efficiency and morale. CSR allows greater communication within the workforce and between management and employees thus leads to improved relationship and higher morale. This, in turn, could lead to increased commitment from staffs, greater efficiency, increased productivity and better teamwork which will ultimately lead to faster and more thorough completion of projects. A happy workforce is a productive workforce; conversely complaints and moans slow down work and distract employees from focusing on the job in hand.

Moreover, implementing CSR policy would enable the aim of achieving sustainable development to be realised. This is because, CSR policy stresses on working towards greater sustainability on site through the practice of waste reduction and resource management procedures (Ahmed et al., 2019).

CSR Disclosure Practices in the Construction Industry - A Global Context

CSR disclosure practices have been an interesting topic among academic researchers largely due to the increasing recognition on the importance of environmentally and socially responsible corporate behaviour to major stakeholders. Myers (2005) defined CSR reporting as a tool to inform stakeholders of a company's environmental, social and economic performance. The reports are often used as a means to measure a company's progress towards sustainability. This view is supported by Brown, Parry & Moon (2009) in their study on "CSR reporting in UK Construction" in which they defined CSR reporting as the opportunity for companies to address stakeholder interests and to demonstrate that the companies are operating in a manner that are both ethical and sustainable.

Over the years, there has been many changes on the relative prominence of global issues and hence, in response to these changes, CSR activities and reporting have evolved accordingly (Brown et.al.2009). According to KPMG's 2005 report, a 'dramatic change' has taken place in the type of CSR reporting which has changed from purely environmental reporting up until 1999 to sustainability reporting which is inclusive of social, environmental and economic

aspects. Carroll (1999) also states that the definitions and concepts of CSR have evolved over the past decades.

Moon (2003) discusses on CSR development and expansion by introducing the CSR 'waves'; which is a method of subdividing the key issues of CSR to identify and compare changes in CSR over time. He suggests that in recent decades, the CSR 'wave' which has originally been about community involvement has expanded and joined by two new waves; one that relates to socially responsible employee relations and the other on the necessity to communicate that business outputs are provided within socially and environmentally acceptable limits.

Several standards and framework on CSR have been developed in order to guide businesses across the world in their attempt to practice sustainability in their business organisation. The ISO 14001 on environmental management for example, has been hugely influential, but social responsibility still represented a major departure for ISO when it was first suggested in 2002. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), a network-based non-governmental organization that aims to drive sustainability and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting had produced the world's most widely used sustainability reporting framework to enable this drive towards greater transparency (Henriques, 2012). The framework, incorporating the 'G3 Guidelines', sets out the Principles and Indicators that can be used by organisations to measure and report their economic, environmental, and social performance. GRI is committed to continuously improving and increasing the use of the Guidelines, which are freely available to the public (BM, 2012).

The launching of the ISO 26000 Guide for Social Responsibility in 2011 marked the growing of CSR as an important part of global business practices with the involvement of working group members from about 80 countries and international organisations such as Consumers International and the International Organisation of Employers. Moreover, to ensure consistency, ISO has also entered special agreements with the ILO, the Global Compact, the GRI and the OECD. As a result, ISO 26000 is probably the most inclusive sustainability standard in regards to the issues it covers. It is a powerful statement of the moral and practical issues facing companies and other organisations. In developing countries, where there are numerous standards and initiatives, it will be particularly influential as companies seek to address their wider responsibilities, perhaps for the first time (Henriques, 2012).

Previous studies on CSR disclosures showed that in terms of CSR reporting, the construction industry is still lagging behind other sectors (Brown et.al. 2009). In a research conducted in the UK in 2009, 12 CSR reports by construction companies were reviewed and analyzed using a comparative framework derived from the Global Reporting Initiative's (GRI) key performance indicators (KPIs). It was found that although companies are referring to the GRI standard of CSR reporting, the extent and level of detail to which companies report on their CSR practices vary significantly across the industry. The study is a clear demonstration that while CSR reporting is an area that some members of the construction industry is very aware of and cover extensively in their reports, others have more room for improvement with regards to their extent of CSR reporting.

CSR Reporting in the Malaysian Construction Industry

The implementation of CSR within the construction industry of Malaysia is not new and in fact, many companies have already been implementing CSR without realising it (Bursa, 2007). However, the realization on the concept of CSR begins when the former Prime Minister of

Malaysia addressed in the 2006 Budget Speech that all PLCs are required to disclose their CSR activities in order to inculcate the culture of socially responsible corporations (Budget Speech, 2006). The directive from the PM is meant to encourage companies to become more engaged in being socially responsible in the way they work and think (Bursa, 2007).

The impacts that the construction industry has upon all of its stakeholders are significant in both positive and negative ways. These impacts can be monitored and measured through CSR reporting and currently, the construction industry is lagging behind in this area (Chan et.al. 2009). Hence, further research and would be beneficial for the industry and the key players within.

The BM has produced a framework for CSR which is intended to help firms in practicing and reporting their CSR activities. The framework has outlined four major components of CSR namely environment, community, workplace and marketplace (Bursa, 2007). Figure 1 shows the key issues in CSR Framework produced by BM.

<p><u>ENVIRONMENT</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate Change • Energy Management • Waste Management • Biodiversity • Endangered Wildlife 	<p><u>COMMUNITY</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee Volunteerism • Education • Youth Development • Underprivileged • Graduate Employment • Children
<p><u>WORKPLACE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee Involvement • Workplace Diversity • Gender Issues • Human Capital Development • Quality of Life • Labour Rights • Human Rights • Health and Safety 	<p><u>MARKETPLACE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green Products • Stakeholder Engagement • Ethical Procurement • Supplier Management • Vendor Development • Social Branding • Corporate Governance

Figure 1: Key CSR Issues in the Bursa Malaysia CSR Framework.

Source: Bursa Malaysia, 2010

Launched in 2006, the BM CSR Framework serves as a set of guidelines for Malaysian public-listed companies (PLCs) who wish to practise CSR within their business organisation. It aims to guide PLCs in defining their CSR priorities, implementation and reporting. The framework covers four focus areas – Environment, Workplace, Community and Marketplace, in no order of priority to highlight the various types of CSR issues and activities relevant to organisations. The framework can be used to support management as well as reporting of CSR. The aim is to go beyond compliance towards making CSR integral in business operations. However, recognising that 'one size does not fit all', it is important for organisations to note that the choice of CSR focus areas depends on several factors which include business nature, resources availability, company inclinations and stakeholders' expectations.

Research Methodology

As in the case with most studies on social and environmental disclosures, a content analysis approach is used in carrying out this research (see for example: Abbot and Monsen, 1979, Abu Baker and Naser, 2000, Belal, 2001). In this study, the CSR reports from 26 construction PLCs were reviewed and compared using the framework provided by BM as described in the previous section to analyse the general reporting trend which appear to be emerging within the Malaysian construction industry. The sample of 26 companies was selected on the basis that they were listed in the Bursa 'construction' sector and have disclosed their sustainability reports. Alongside the core information derived from the companies' reports, any supplementary information available from the company websites was also reviewed.

A record was made of the CSR issues described in the BM Framework which were addressed in each of the companies' report. Although the exact wording of the Bursa's Framework may not have been used or the issues may not have been referred to explicitly in the reports, it was possible to associate the reported information to relevant CSR issues listed in the BM CSR Framework. The purpose of this analysis is to identify gaps between the reports and the framework by Bursa and to determine the extent to which companies are practising CSR within their organisations. However, it should be noted that this methodology is intended to review the themes within the companies' CSR reports and not to assess their quality or performance in CSR. The findings from the review are described in the following section.

Results and Discussion

Analysis on the General Trend of CSR Reporting by Construction PLCs based on BM's CSR Framework

Table 2 illustrates the key CSR focus and issues as described in the BM's CSR Framework and the number of occurrences of each issue in the companies' CSR reports.

Table 2: Occurrences of CSR Issues from Bursa Malaysia CSR Framework's in Companies' CSR Reports.

CSR Focus	CSR Issues	Occurrences In Companies Report	%
ENVIRONMENT	• Climate Change	4	15.38
	• Energy Management	7	26.92
	• Waste Management	3	11.54
	• Biodiversity	2	7.69
	• Endangered Wildlife	2	7.69
WORKPLACE	• Employee Involvement	18	69.23
	• Workplace Diversity	7	26.92
	• Gender Issues	0	0
	• Human Capital Development	15	57.69
	• Quality of Life	7	26.92
	• Labour Rights	3	11.54
	• Human Rights	0	0
	• Health and Safety	19	73.08

MARKETPLACE	• Green Products	3	11.54
	• Stakeholder Engagement	20	76.92
	• Ethical Procurement	3	11.54
	• Supplier Management	2	7.69
	• Vendor Development	0	0
	• Social Branding	1	3.85
	• Corporate Governance	21	80.77
COMMUNITY	• Employee Volunteerism (Social Welfare)	26	100
	• Education	16	61.54
	• Youth Development	14	53.85
	• Underprivileged	6	23.08
	• Graduate Employment	7	26.92
	• Children	7	26.92

Based on the number of occurrences of the CSR issues within the reports, Table 2 provides an indication of the most prominent CSR issues that are being reported upon by the sample companies. Apparently, almost every CSR issue within the BM Framework is being reported upon by at least one company; exceptions being that of gender issues, human rights and vendor development where none of the companies have reported upon any of these three issues.

Of the four main CSR focus stated in the BM CSR Framework, Community appeared to be the most prominent where at least 1/4 of the companies reported on all six issues listed under the community section. This is followed by Workplace (six out of eight issues mentioned in reports) and Marketplace (six out of seven issues mentioned). On the other hand, although all five issues under the Environment section was reported upon by at least one company in the sample, the level of disclosure for such issues are lacking compared to the other three main CSR focus.

According to CSR 2004, reporting could sometimes be a company's public relation (PR) agenda; informing to stakeholders on the company's CSR practice would help in promoting good image and reputation, which will ultimately lead to greater business benefits. Based on the analysis of the reports, most companies made clear of their involvement with and contribution to the community in their annual reports. This highlights the fact that reporting on the provision of community is recognized as being vital to the construction companies. In theory, this kind of community involvement should improve the perceptions of the stakeholders of the company and thus it is understandable that these issues should have a relatively high occurrence in the CSR reports.

Disclosing the company's CSR activities in relation to Workplace was predicted to be of great importance in the study by Brown et.al. (2009), owing to the fact that construction activities have always been associated with negative issues such as the danger on site and pollution it creates. Since CSR practice within the construction industry seeks to minimize these negative perceptions, companies are predicted to be paying more attention on promoting health and safety among other issues. Moreover, human resource contributes greatly on a company's success and hence it is assumed that companies within the construction sector would focus more on informing to public on a sustainable and balance workplace. However, although workplace division is not the most prominent area that companies reported on in this study, such predictions were still apparent as results indicated that issues like health and safety, employee

involvement and human capital development have been widely reported in the companies' reports.

In relation to the Marketplace Division, only the areas of Stakeholder Engagement and Corporate Governance were widely reported upon, where the issues were mentioned by 20 and 21 companies respectively. This is largely due to the fact that one of the main objectives of CSR reporting is to create better image and reputation to stakeholders (Myers, 2005). Hence, it is only natural that companies would seek to highlight the issue of stakeholder engagement in their annual reports. Other issues in the Marketplace division (green products, ethical procurement, supplier management, vendor development and social branding) were poorly covered in the reports. These findings contradicted the hypothesis made by Chan et.al. (2008) where it was assumed that products and services as well as social branding would be the most prominent issues within CSR reports.

Reports on environmental issues within the sample reports have been unexpectedly low. All issues under this division were found in the CSR reports, but the number of occurrences was relatively low, with the most frequent being energy management, reported by seven companies. However, this may be because the environmental issues that were found in the companies' reports vary from that listed in the BM's framework. Issues like environmental certification, environmental management program, standard compliance and conservation programs were not listed in the BM's framework but have been widely reported in the companies' CSR disclosure. This can be regarded as the most apparent gap between the BM's CSR Framework and the companies' CSR report which will be further explained in the following section.

On the whole, the findings from this study showed some similarities to the study conducted on CSR reporting in the UK construction industry by Brown et.al. in 2009 where the results of their analysis indicated that of the five CSR mini-waves (community, health and safety, environmental performance, energy and resources, and workforce), community involvement was the most reported upon in the reviewed reports. This was followed by health and safety, which was initially predicted to be a very high priority in the companies' reporting activities. Similarly to this study, environment was the least reported upon in that particular research.

Analysis on the gap between BM's CSR Framework and the companies' CSR Reports.

Based on the outcome from the review of CSR reports and the BM's CSR Framework, several gaps have been identified. The most notable was reporting with relation to environmental aspects of CSR. Of the five issues listed under the environment division of the BM's Framework, none showed to be of great importance in the companies' reports given that the highest occurrence was only seven out of 26. However, based on the review of the reports, most of the companies put great emphasis on their CSR activities in relation to the environment, but the issues that companies have been reporting on are not within the BM's Framework. Issues like environmental standard compliance and environmental conservation programs for instance, were widely reported on by 58% and 54% of the companies respectively but such issues were not listed in the BM's framework. This influence the outcome of this study in terms of determining the CSR reporting trend by the companies as it is measured based on the number of occurrences of the issues listed in the BM's framework. Apart from environmental issues, there are other CSR aspects that were not listed in the BM's framework. Nonetheless, these issues did not feature prominently in the reports. Examples of these include sports development

and arts and culture in the community division. However, the occurrence of these issues was only around 11% to 23% of the overall sample.

The gap in issues listed in the BM's Framework and the ones within the reports might occur due to the fact that the BM's framework was produced back in 2006 when CSR reporting have not yet been made compulsory. Given that according to Brown et.al (2009), CSR activities and reporting have evolved accordingly in recent years due to changes on the relative prominence of global issues, there is a high possibility that CSR reporting in Malaysia has also expanded and thus some issues that companies are paying attention on may not have been included in the BM's Framework. Nonetheless, apart from the issues mentioned above, the other CSR aspects that the companies reported upon were listed in the BM's Framework. This gives an indication that, despite the level of reporting that is still considered to be relatively low, the way that companies report on CSR activities is somewhat in line with the guidelines and framework produced by the BM.

Conclusion

This research shows the extent to which companies report on their CSR activities can vary significantly across the construction industry. On the whole, every company in the sample had produced a report on its CSR activities which reflects that construction PLCs have complied with the requirements in the 2007 Budget Speech for CSR to be disclosed in the company's report.

With regards to the CSR Framework by the BM, the findings showed that every company in the research sample reported on at least one issue from the BM's framework. The CSR topic that appeared to be most prominent in the reports is social welfare which is reported upon by all companies thus reflecting on the vast attention that companies are paying with regards to community involvement activities. Of the four main CSR focus areas stated in the BM's Framework, Community Involvement was the most reported upon followed by Marketplace, Workplace and Environment being the least reported on. This result supported the findings from previous research which stated that companies would focus more on contributing to the community as it helps in improving corporate image and reputation in the eyes of the stakeholders (Lu et al., 2018).

However, there have been some gaps between the framework and the companies' reports as there are some issues that were included within the companies' reports but were not listed in the BM's framework. This shows that some companies do not rely solely on the framework produced by the BM but go beyond compliance to this available guidance for CSR. Nevertheless, the level of CSR reporting for most companies in the sample is still relatively low. This shows that while CSR reporting as an area that some members of the industry are very aware of and covers extensively in their reports, others have more room for improvement with regards to the extent of their CSR reporting.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

This study is subjected to several limitations. Firstly, this study relates to the companies' annual reports of a single year only. Whereas, CSR is a concept and practice that evolves over time and therefore, to study the CSR reporting trend within the industry, one should also take into account the development and progress in CSR reporting. Secondly, it relies solely on the companies' publicly available information on CSR and thus, other aspects that are not apparent in the reports could not be reviewed and studied such as drivers behind the reporting of CSR

issues, benefits of CSR reporting to the organizations, etc. Furthermore, owing to the fact that not all companies listed in the Main Board of the BM disclosed their CSR reports publicly, the sample in this research could not be regarded as representative to the whole construction industry. However, these limitations apply to all content analysis studies and have been noted in previous researches (Gamble, 1996).

For further research in this area, it is vital to explore the possible drivers behind the companies' CSR practice. With recognition of these drivers, it is then possible to comprehend why certain issues are given more emphasis by the companies compared to some others. Moreover, research needs to be conducted on the actual CSR performance of the companies. This is because, as stated in CSR, 2004, companies often treat CSR disclosure as a Public Relation activity and therefore it is vital for the public and stakeholders to know which company is simply 'green-washing' their products and which ones are 'walking the talk'.

Also, with regards to reporting, it is vital to examine how much future change is going to be driven by regulations or enforced policy compared with market or voluntary measures. This will then ascertain whether there is a role for Government to drive further progress in CSR practice and reporting and what that role should be. With improved research in CSR particularly in the construction sector, it is then possible to achieve the concept of triple bottom-line; economic, environmental and social sustainability which will then enables the concept and benefits of sustainable business to be realized.

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