Towards an understanding of corporate (dis)engagement with social justice advocacy

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Abstract
If it can be argued that companies should engage with social justice advocacy, what factors might deter them from doing so? This question is pursued in a qualitative research study with participants from corporate and social justice organisations. Six inhibiting factors are identified: a lack of understanding of social justice concepts; fear of reputational risk; short-term profit orientation; a compliance mindset; disconnectedness from operating environment; and recognition that business purpose will determine its societal engagement. This research extends the theoretical and practice boundaries of corporate social responsibility, while also advocating for an intensified engagement of management education with social justice in practice.

1. Introduction
There is increasing focus worldwide on the role of business in society today. Globally, sustainability concerns and shifting value systems are re-shaping expectations of socially responsible business, as seen with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), global corporate initiatives such as the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), and leading standards such as the King IV Report on Corporate Governance (IoDSA, 2016). An important aspect of this corporate social responsibility (CSR) discourse examines the relevance and responsiveness of business to modern day challenges (WEF, 2021; Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Crane, Matten & Spence, 2014; Dobers & Halme, 2009; Newell & Frynas, 2007).

In this article, we argue that corporate engagement with social justice advocacy is an important and overlooked area of CSR which can enhance a business' societal responsiveness and legitimacy. This view finds basis in UNGC (2014) corporate sustainability recommendations that investing in communities and public policy advocacy supports social development and has business benefits, such as improved risk management and enhanced social license to operate. Further, social justice advocacy is recognised by civil society organisations and development practitioners as an effective mechanism to drive positive systemic change and advance human rights (PARI, 2020; Heywood, 2018; Advocacy Initiative, 2013; Klugman, 2011; Atlantic Reports, 2008).

Despite such recommendations however, research located in the South African context finds that corporates nevertheless appear reluctant to invest in advocacy of social justice issues, neither as part of broader corporate citizenship obligations, nor through their corporate social investment funding (Trialogue, 2021; Funding Practice Alliance, 2017). This corporate (dis)engagement with social justice advocacy holds relevance in a country described by the World Bank (2018) as having a dual economy with one of the highest inequality rates in the world, perpetuating both inequality and exclusion. Another area of bearing is the contraction of funding inflows into South African civil society which has compromised the sector's ability to engage with structural drivers of poverty and inequality (Maboya & McKay, 2019; Gumede, 2018: Ritchie & Judge, 2013). Further, the South African regulatory landscape, discussed in more detail in the following section, offers opportunity for advocacy engagement through (i) constitutionally enshrined socio-economic rights (Heyns & Brand, 2009; Republic of South Africa, 1996), and (ii) through corporate obligation to invest in socio-economic development, commonly termed corporate social investment (CSI) (Republic of South Africa, 2003).

Based on this landscape, this study undertook an exploration of factors that impact on corporate (dis)engagement with social justice advocacy. The study employed qualitative research through eleven semi-structured interviews across three defined target groups: (i) corporates who *do not* fund social justice advocacy, (ii) corporates (including corporate-established trusts) who *do* fund social justice advocacy, and (iii) social justice organisations.

The significance of the study lies with social justice advocacy as an aspect of CSR that deservedly requires more attention. Through surfacing the rationale and reasons which influence corporate attitudes on this topic, both corporates and civil society groups can engage more constructively to evolve CSR with an orientation to social justice, in relation to South Africa's socio-political context.

In the sections that follow, there is first an explanation of key concepts combined with a review of literature examining three approaches to CSR. The methodology section explains the qualitative engagement with the three target groups. In the section on findings there emerges an explanation of the intersectional factors that inhibit corporate engagement with social justice advocacy. The article concludes with recommendations for research, education, and practice.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Clarifying key concepts

'Social justice advocacy' is a term that encompasses the concept of advocacy work towards social justice and equality ideals (Mlangeni, 2017; Klugman, 2010). At times, the action of advocacy is already *assumed* into the definition of social justice (PARI, 2020). In the development context, policy advocacy in particular aims to bring about systemic change through legislative change, or application of policy to correct perceived injustices (Atlantic Reports, 2008). Here, advocacy can be understood as a range of activities that work together to achieve a defined outcome such as: conducting research and dissemination of the findings, raising public awareness about a key issue, community organising and grassroots mobilisation, building capacity, policy development, lobbying, litigation and electoral activity (Atlantic Reports, 2008). Where this article refers to social justice advocacy specifically, we recognise that advocacy work is essentially an instrumental action which can align to different goals, and these can include corporate-related interests such as lobbying for less regulated operating environments.

By comparison, social justice is a deeply complex notion on which there is an extensive body of literature. Social justice ideals are premised on the idea of human dignity and strive for a more just and equitable society for all, through positively changing structural drivers of poverty and inequality, to achieve a fair distribution of economic goods, political rights, and social equity (PARI, 2020; Mlangeni, 2017; Chipkin & Meny-Gibert, 2013; Klugman, 2010). The notion of social justice is not new, as Hemphill (2015) points to the tradition of philosophical literature and religious texts which have long since grappled with concepts of justice, fairness and righteousness. However, usage of the term 'social justice' appeared during the Industrial Revolution relating to economic justice for workers and has since slowly expanded to also include concepts of political and social rights, as well as human rights (Hemphill, 2015; Chipkin & Meny-Gibert, 2013; Klugman, 2010). While there is a tendency to conflate social justice and human rights, the differentiator is that human rights apply to all equally, whereas social justice aims to redress situations of disparity and inequality. An example underscoring the interplay between these two concepts is that the South African constitution ensures equal rights for all. However, because of persistent inequality, these rights cannot be accessed equally (PARI, 2016). More recently, climate justice is recognised as a social justice issue, where marginalised and vulnerable communities are most likely to bear the unequal burdens of future climate change challenges (PARI, 2020; Beltrán, Hacker & Begun, 2016).

An important notion underpinning social justice ideals is that of fairness. What is considered fair and just – and for whom – means that social justice is not politically neutral and remains an area of ongoing philosophical and political contestation (PARI, 2020; PARI, 2016). Classic liberalist proponents of social justice such as John Rawls advocate for equal basic rights, equality of opportunity and the interests of the least advantaged members of society (Wenar, 2021), whereas libertarian perspectives such as those of Friedrich Hayek focus on freedom of the individual as being paramount and oppose limitations or interventions by the state (Schmidtz & Boettke, 2021). Of interest to this article, social justice scholar David Miller (cited in Chipkin & Meny-Gibert 2013) presents the notion that justice can also be pursued *through the structures and entities* that are responsible for the allocation of benefits in society. In practice, social justice organisations, although not a clearly defined sector, tend to fall within the ambit of those civil society organisations that lobby and advocate for social, political, and economic justice (PARI, 2016; Chipkin & Meny-Gibert, 2013).

To clarify the term 'corporate engagement' with social justice advocacy, we take the view that engagement covers a spectrum of actions which include: (i) multi-stakeholder engagement with social justice organisations as societal partners (WEF, 2021; Sangokoya, 2021; IoDSA, 2016; UNGC, 2014; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), (ii) funding of social justice organisations in order to capacitate advocacy work and advance human rights (Corrigall-Brown, 2016; UNGC, 2014; Kraak, 2013; Atlantic Reports, 2008) and (iii) corporate leadership advocating on key societal issues, thereby positively influencing peers, consumers and governments towards responsible business practice (Zheng, 2020; Tempels et al., 2017; UNGC, 2014).

CSR addresses the fundamental role of business embedded within the context of society and the environment. Importantly, this business-society relationship, and societal expectations thereof, exists as a social construct within a specific context (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Dahlsrud, 2008; Newell & Frynas, 2007). Thus, what constitutes socially responsible corporate practice is a continuously evolving concept shaped by ongoing conversations with society. While there exist many definitions of CSR (Dahlsrud, 2008), for the purposes of this article, we refer to the King III Report's definition thereof as:

> The responsibility of the company for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that: contributes to sustainable development, including the health and the welfare of society; takes into account the legitimate interests and expectations of stakeholders; is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour; and is integrated throughout the company and practiced in its relationships. (IoDSA 2009, p.188)

This definition of CSR highlights a focus on social impact, the imperative for mindful decision making, for sensitivity towards stakeholders, and an embeddedness in existing ethical and legal frameworks, all of which may point towards corporate engagement with social justice. On this basis, we explore the theoretical framework for corporate engagement with social justice advocacy and discuss three approaches to CSR in the following section.

2.2 CSR as response to global sustainability concerns

Where CSR is approached as a response to sustainability concerns, it is held that corporates will integrate and apply sustainability principles as a guiding philosophy to determine their responsibilities (IoDSA, 2016; UNGC, 2014). Sustainability concepts are those which aim to promote responsible development that counter the negative impacts of overconsumption of resources and waste, and unequal patterns of power and issues of equity (UNGC, 2014; Swilling & Annecke, 2012). It is this expectation of ethical corporate action for the common good, which crucially underpins leading sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs, the UNGC and corporate practice standards articulated in the series of King Reports on Corporate Governance published by the IoDSA since 1994. As example, the UNGC (2014, p.11) describes corporate sustainability as operating in ways that meet, at a minimum, "fundamental responsibilities in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption" and further recommends policy advocacy to positively tackle societal crises through responsible business practices.

However, it is the normative nature of ethics-based CSR that presents conceptual and ideological differences around what constitutes responsible business practice and sustainable development (Dahlsrud, 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Thus, without an implicit *value shift* underpinning a corporate sustainability rationale, the capacity to internalise and implement integrated thinking into areas of governance, management and culture can be compromised. This holds relevance particularly in areas of ethical corporate self-regulation and non-mandatory disclosure leading to criticisms such as the materiality of compliance-orientated reporting (La Torre, 2018; Struwig & Janse van Rensburg, 2016), or the lack of obligation on firms to report on harm inflicted outside the business (Flower, 2015; Gwanyanya, 2015). Thus, ideals of social and environmental equity embedded in sustainability principles, remain dependent on corporate will to implement.

2.3 CSR as discursive democracy

The area of political CSR theory recognises the business firm as a political actor in the public sphere. In the changing contexts of our globalised world, multinational corporations are seen to exert increasing influence in the public sphere, with corresponding insufficiency of nation-states to regulate global business or provide global public goods (Scherer et al., 2014; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Newell & Frynas, 2007; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Recognising this, the concept of CSR as discursive democracy holds that corporates should likewise employ democratic principles of inclusive discourse on matters relating to their exercise of power and public will formation in the public sphere. Here, Scherer and Palazzo (2007) describe this process of discourse as joint communication between different parties, and view this as the only means for pluralistic societies to find common ground on contested issues. The benefit of such collaborative work is that it allows corporates to practise political co-responsibility, develop contextual sensitivity, and pre-empt potential contestations between a business and its societal environment (Newell & Frynas, 2007; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). In this regard, political theories of CSR embody social justice ideals of *participatory justice*, by shifting the focus of responsible business to its stakeholder engagement process. However, Scherer et al. (2014) observe that there are inherent power dynamics in business-society relations, and these can lead to participatory exclusion from the process of engagement. Other challenges related to the *intentionality* with which corporates approach such engagements means that there is risk of compliance-orientated interactions (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007); and recognition that civil society organisations are themselves political actors in the public sphere and must necessarily establish their own legitimacy as corporate partners (Baur & Palazzo, 2011).

2.4 CSR and South African legislation and governance

Given that this research is situated in the South African business context, this section reviews the relevant regulatory environment, noting the unique framework of legislation and governance practices relating to CSR. This includes the country's constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1966), the Companies Act (Republic of South Africa, 2008), the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act (Republic of South Africa, 2003) and the series of King Reports on Corporate Governance culminating in the King IV Report (IoDSA, 2016).

As the supreme law of the land, the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, enshrines the rights of all people in the country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality, and freedom. The South African Constitution uniquely recognises socio-economic rights – alongside civil and political rights – and requires of the state to take reasonable measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of these rights (Heyns & Brand, 2009; Republic of South Africa, 1996).

An amended Companies Act brought into effect corporate compliance with the Bill of Rights, and additionally required a Social and Ethics Committee be established for state-owned companies, listed companies and companies with an above-threshold public interest score. Guided by this, governing bodies of the Social and Ethics Committees are required to apply their minds to ensure their organisation does indeed produce social benefits to the economy, workplace, society and natural environment (Republic of South Africa, 2008; TEI, 2018).

The B-BBEE Act (Republic of South Africa, 2003) and its associated codes, strive to redress apartheid legacies through meaningful transformation for citizens previously denied access to economic opportunity, thereby reducing inequality and unemployment. In relation to this study, one element of the B-BBEE practice codes obliges corporates to invest in socio-economic development initiatives for the benefit of communities. Likewise, leading corporate governance codes such as the King IV Report (IoDSA, 2016) recognise business' responsibility to broader society and maintain that, ultimately, an organisation's ability to create value, is interdependent on its ability to create value for its stakeholders.

When read together, these legal and regulatory instruments provide both mandate and scope for corporates to engage with social justice issues. However, challenges to this mandate can occur where corporates adopt economic priority (that is short-term profit over sustainable value creation); an instrumentalist-CSR is likely to result in a compliance approach to legislative and governance requirements (Scherer & Palazzo 2007; Garriga & Mele, 2004). Further, Anwana (2020) notes that where corporates feel coerced to comply with legislation, they tend not to practice strategic CSR but instead invest in 'feel good' initiatives with little long-term impact on society.

A review of the literature finds that, despite theoretical differences in CSR approaches, there is consensus to support corporate engagement with social transformation. However, challenges exist that hamper, restrict or negatively inhibit the intentionality for social transformation within these approaches. The research project set out to explore these factors in practice and the following section outlines the methodology for this purpose.

3. Research methodology

A qualitative methodology was applied, and descriptive data was gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews (SSIs). Qualitative research is increasingly recognised as an important approach to business research (Bryman & Bell et al., 2014) and SSIs are well suited to business-related research, as they allow for probing with open-ended questions to engage the thoughts of respondents (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). In areas of new research, Adams (2015) note that SSIs also offer latitude to explore unchartered territory to find useful leads on potential issues and can provide space for respondents to reflect candidly.

Two objectives guided the execution of the research:

a) To investigate factors which impact corporate (dis)engagement with social justice advocacy in South Africa.

b) In the long-term, to contribute an expanded understanding of corporate citizenship and broaden discourse on the evolving role of business in society.

To strengthen data validity, the interview sample targeted three research groups, namely: (i) corporates *not* engaged in funding social justice advocacy; (ii) corporates, including corporate-established trusts, who *were* engaged in funding social justice advocacy; and (iii) social justice organisations (SJOs). Parameters for the three groups and respondent profiles are outlined in Table 1. In determining SJO participants, the study used the definition of Chipkin & Meny-Gibert's (2013) profiling of social justice organisations as those: (i) concerned with how resources are distributed in society and which seek a fairer/more just distribution of public goods, (ii) ensuring that the procedures, norms or rules governing political and public decision-making respect basic rights and liberties, and (iii) ensuring people are treated with respect and dignity by public institutions, members of the public and/or community structures.

The research sample consisted of eleven organisations across the three groups, with corporate respondents being at group executive and senior management level, and SJO respondents being in positions of national leadership. A non-probability approach was adopted, in line with purposive sampling methods (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016), to ensure that a cross-section of industry sectors and advocacy focus areas were represented. Interviews (45-60 minutes) were conducted telephonically or through face-to-face meetings where location allowed, and the necessary ethical clearance and interview consent was secured before conducting the interviews. The interview guides consisted of open-ended questions expressing the research interest of the project. Data was analysed using an inductive approach which identified codes and emerging themes relevant to the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2014). These themes are presented and discussed in the following section.

Table 1: Overview of research target groups, parameters and respondent profiles

No	Target group	Group parameters / Respondent profile	Industry sectors / Advocacy areas	Respondent profile
1	**Non-funding corporates:** Not engaged in funding advocacy for social justice issues	• JSE-listed, multi-national company. • Online Integrated Report <IR> available. • Not engaged in social justice advocacy. • Respondent at group executive level, preferably in business areas such as sustainability, corporate affairs or stakeholder engagement.	**Industry sectors represented:** • Financial Services • Mining • Media • Travel and Leisure	**Roles included:** Group Executive level (sustainability, stakeholder engagement, social impact)
2	**Funding corporates:** Incl. corporate trusts engaged in funding advocacy for social justice issues	• JSE-listed, multi-national company. • Online Integrated Report <IR> available. • Engaged in social justice advocacy. • Respondent at group executive level, preferably in business areas such as sustainability, corporate affairs or stakeholder engagement.	**Industry sectors represented:** • Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) • Financial Services • General Industrials **Advocacy areas supported:** • Human rights and refugee support • Constitutional rights • Education and nutrition	**Roles included:** Group Executive level (sustainability), Senior Management
3	**Social justice organisations:** SJOs engaged in advocacy work at national level	• Established organisation with national footprint, engaged in one or more social justice focus areas*. • Respondent should sit at national level. **as defined by Chipkin and Meny-Gibert (2013)*	**Advocacy areas supported:** • Constitutional rights • Media freedoms; access to information • Education • Access to justice; media independence; governance and accountability.	**Roles included:** Executive/National level

4. Findings

Six interrelated data themes were identified as factors which impact negatively on corporate engagement with social justice advocacy. These factors were found to be: a fundamental lack of understanding of the social justice terrain; a fear of reputational risk; a pursuit of short-term profit rather than sustainable profit; a compliance approach to regulatory and governance requirements; a disconnectedness from their operating environment; and recognition that a business' view of its purpose will ultimately determine the extent of its societal engagement. Table 2 provides an overview of these six data themes and underlying sub-themes, and notes the general tone of each theme. A discussion of each theme follows hereafter.

Table 2: Factors which impact corporate (dis)engagement with social justice advocacy

Data themes	Tone	Sub-themes
Lack of understanding	• "What is social justice?" • Ignorance • Unknown terrain	Lack of business understanding around social justice issues; social justice presents as unknown terrain.
		Business is not familiar with advocacy as a social justice mechanism.
		Business lacks know-how of systemic development practice such as social justice advocacy; applies CSI interventions.
		SJOs lack understanding of business logic, discourse and language; corporates present as unknown terrain.
Fear of risk and reprisal	• Guardedness • 'No-go' zone • Reputation risk	Business fears association with government critics; fear of reprisal; fears are exacerbated within racial and political narrative.
		Business fear of extremism or views perceived as extreme; business is risk averse.
		Corporates fear own exposure of inadequacy or wrongdoing.
Short-term profit orientation	• What's in it for us? • Immediate vs long-term thinking • Compliance vs ethics	Business questions return on investment; there are differing views on how to approach profit-making.
		Leadership metrics do not incentivise long-term views.
		Difficulty in quantifying social impact and social cost.
Compliance mindset	• Why do more? • Compliance seen as maximum • Functional vs intentional approach	CSI and B-BBEE compliance; no policy imperative for systemic approach / social justice.
		Social and Ethics Committees have varying levels of commitment to engage with their mandate.
		Stakeholder engagement takes a narrow approach; CSI is seen as community engagement; no broader societal voices included.
		Integrated reporting lacks integrated thinking.
Disconnectedness from operating environment	• Out of touch • Apartness • Inaccessible	Stakeholder-centricity and materiality is determined by business; power and perspective issues.
		Leadership commitment for engagement takes time and effort.
		Dialogue and access are impacted by power relations.
Business purpose	• World views/ philosophy • Different views • Leadership ethics	Purpose determines how business views its role in society; there are varying world views.
		Socio-political role of business is not well understood; especially relating to civil society and democracy-building.
		Leadership ethics will ultimately shape the business purpose.

4.1 Lack of understanding: Social justice as an unknown terrain

The concept of business 'not understanding' the social justice terrain was noted across all three research groups and included variations of terms such as 'not aware' and 'ignorance'. Analysis pointed to three areas where corporates lack understanding: (i) of social justice issues, (ii) of advocacy work related to social justice, and (iii) of systemic development practice such as social justice advocacy (as opposed to CSI interventions).

A fourth area points to lack of understanding by SJOs of the corporate terrain in terms of corporate rationale and discourse.

The aspect of corporates 'not understanding' social justice was noted with two non-funding corporate respondents requesting clarity on the topic at the onset of their interviews. In the SJO interviews, organisations confirmed that, from their experience, corporates have little understanding of nor show any support for advocacy-related work.

According to one SJO respondent (Respondent 6), "the first issue is simply awareness, corporates are not aware of advocacy as a work area". Corporates appear to be familiar with advocacy related to business interests but appear to lack understanding of advocacy for social justice issues. Another aspect highlights that corporates may lack knowledge of systemic development practice such as social justice advocacy, as opposed to 'doing good' through short-term CSI interventions. One SJO shared the view that corporate South African donors "rarely wanted to be included in advocacy work", and that there was greater uptake in advocacy interest from their international grant-making donors who were looking for social change, in particular to "change political dialogue into more democratic processes" (Respondent 12). An argument was also raised by a corporate respondent that SJOs should engage with business rationale, language and logic in terms of building a business case, rather than appealing to emotions and virtues: "You've got to make business realise why it's in their self-interest to do this, that's what you've got to do" (Respondent 9). This suggests SJO groups could enhance their engagement with corporates by familiarising themselves with corporate legislation, governance codes, logic and language.

4.2 Fear of risk and reprisal

Fear was observed as a theme in relation to corporates' concern around reputational risk by engaging with organisations involved in social justice or with social justice advocacy. This issue was acknowledged across all three research groups. One participant expressed the view that "corporates are very careful about reputation management" and were concerned that advocating for social justice issues may affect their stakeholder relationships (Respondent 6). The views expressed a tone of corporate caution and guardedness towards social justice engagement. On analysis, the issue of fear coalesced around three issues: (i) a fear of association with perceived government critics, (ii) a fear of association with extreme views and extremism and, (iii) a fear of potentially drawing criticism for own non-compliance or wrongdoing. Findings indicate that corporates may fear association with SJOs because this might be interpreted by government as businesses adopting an oppositional or critical stance, where this is taken as "a direct swipe at government saying that they are not doing anything" (Respondent 5). Commentary from two non-funding respondents observed that this fear aspect was further exacerbated within South Africa's complex racial and political narrative, where there is perceived tension between the so-called black state and white-owned capital. Interestingly, the fear of reprisal was deemed valid by all research groups, with one non-funding corporate participant claiming their organisation had experienced such repercussions. However, one corporate-funding respondent maintained their organisation had benefited positively from supporting advocacy for constitutional rights, arguing that their corporate legitimacy and reputation as a responsible corporate citizen had been enhanced. Another perspective of fear noted that corporates appear risk-averse and unwilling to adopt controversial views, with an SJO commenting, "they don't want to rock the boat" and "they prefer to keep their head down" (Respondent 10). However, one corporate participant highlighted that corporates have the challenge of navigating a plurality of stakeholder voices on, at times, conflicting issues. The fear of attracting criticism or exposure for own non-compliance or wrongdoing was also noted as another inhibiting sub-theme, where one SJO respondent commented that business, like government, is fearful they will be called out on what they're not doing: "If you are going to fund social justice issues, you need to be sure your house is in order" (Respondent 6).

4.3 Pursuit of short-term profit as opposed to sustainable profit

A short-term profit orientation was noted as contributing to corporate non-engagement with social justice issues. All three research groups agreed that business was driven by profit, however some respondents held that the generation of profit could be achieved through a sustainable value-creation orientation. Data suggests that three issues drive the short-term approach to profit: (i) where businesses need to see a return on investment, (ii) where leadership metrics are finance-focused, and (iii) that challenges are experienced in quantifying social cost and benefits into business decision-making.

"Social justice, what's in it for us?" In response to the question of return of investment, one non-funding corporate stated that investing in social justice advocacy would present as "a hard sell to their Exco" (Respondent 14), as it would cost more over and above current corporate CSI requirements, would take longer to see results, and would not offer a return on investment in terms of direct benefit. The reference to return on investment in relation to their CSI spend suggests that compliance pressure is a contributing factor in profit-related decisions. The same respondent provided an example that their preferred social investment would be skills training that meets their CSI requirements and generates a talent pipeline for their industry. When viewed through this lens, investing in social justice may not present as a desirable option for business. An alternative perspective of return on investment was however offered by SJOs and funding corporates respondents, who maintained that all businesses have a vested commercial interest in an equitable society. One such SJO commented, "because the more we are able to actively create just communities, just economies and equitable environments, the better the corporate agenda can actually be fulfilled" (Respondent 12).

The aspect of leadership metrics was also noted as another contributing factor, with one SJO participant observing that corporate actions are driven by the metrics applied: "I think part of the problem is around how business measures itself, how it recognises and rewards performance" (Respondent 7). Aligned to this, the question of executive remuneration was raised, where CEO rewards are linked to financial performance, but do not necessarily include a positive contribution to social justice issues. A third sub-theme relating to short-term profit suggests that corporates do not engage with social justice issues because business decision-making tools and criteria are not able to adequately quantify social impacts against financial metrics. In this regard, one interviewee observed that quantification is the preferred basis for business decision-making: "Developing measures in terms of social impact and social cost and benefits is extremely difficult. And unfortunately, in corporates, the numbers count. If you can put numbers to things, even though those numbers aren't perfect, it helps" (Respondent 9).

4.4 Compliance approach to legislation and regulatory requirements

A compliance mindset by corporates emerged as another factor which impacted on social justice advocacy. This was noted in relation to four different areas of business responsibilities namely: (i) CSI compliance with B-BBEE requirements; (ii) varying levels of engagement by Social and Ethics Committees; and (iii) adopting a narrow view to engagement with community stakeholders; and (iv) challenges noted with implementing integrated thinking and integrated reporting.

CSI compliance to B-BBEE requirements was noted with one non-funding corporate saying: "It's a lot of money we're putting into CSI. If you look at the reason why we put so much money into CSI, it's because of a need for compliance" (Respondent 11). Commentary from several participants provided a sense that CSI was seen as a 'required spend' and the primary motivation was to meet compliance pressure, and thus did not really encourage deeper engagement with social justice. Compliance also related to levels of commitment and engagement by Social and Ethics Committees. One respondent noted that, because of the statutory nature of this committee (Republic of South Africa, 2008), they have to comply for requirements of good practice: "So, yes, it is a bit mechanical and to a large extent tick-boxing because they're trying to make sure that they comply" (Respondent 11). Whereas other corporate commentary observed a shift in their Social and Ethics Committee towards intentional engagement with "more value-add, real strategic issues that affect the group" (Respondent 14). Importantly though, this interviewee acknowledged they were still not at the stage of addressing social justice issues.

A third aspect of compliance related to corporate engagement with society being understood through their CSI activities. In this regard, one non-funding corporate participant confirmed a "heavy, heavy reliance on CSI activities because that's where you can see evidence easily" (Respondent 5). However, whether these CSI activities are effective and authentic stakeholder conversations may be questioned, as Corrigall-Brown (2016) notes that donor-grantee relationships can be laden with power dynamics. Compliance was also noted in the way companies approached their integrated reporting requirements. Implementing integrated thinking and reporting was acknowledged as a challenge by participants. An SJO respondent opined that business was "still getting its head" around integrated reporting (Respondent 7), and one corporate interviewee acknowledged that they "still continue to operate in a silo-mentality" (Respondent 5). This evidence suggests that, when corporates operate with a compliance approach, they tend to interpret legislative and governance requirements as the maximum (rather than minimum), which leads to functional decision-making and limited stakeholder engagement with other societal representatives such as social justice groups.

4.5 Disconnectedness from operating environment

The theme of disconnectedness was noted through various terms and phrases used by respondents where business was described as 'not penetrable' and 'insular' and 'its own system'. Interestingly, the non-funding corporate group did not contribute commentary on this theme, which could suggest a blind spot where these firms may not realise their own inaccessibility as experienced by others. The theme of disconnectedness centred around three areas, which included (i) stakeholder-centricity and engagement with society, (ii) leadership commitment to engage, and (iii) the concept of dialogue and release of power.

Stakeholder-centricity refers to how corporates orientate themselves to their stakeholders. One corporate interviewee expressed the view that most stakeholders have some form of legal relationship with the corporate (such as staff, shareholders, industry regulators, suppliers, customers), whereas societal groups have an ill-defined relationship with corporates. Where this happens, these varied societal groups are likely to be subsumed into a broad ill-defined category called 'community'. This suggests that concepts of 'community' and 'civil society' may warrant closer examination by businesses and SJOs. This holds relevance for how corporates manage calls for access and inclusion by societal actors, such as social justice organisations, whom they may deem to not be a material stakeholder.

The commitment, or lack thereof, by leadership to meet with external stakeholders was also factored as a contributor to disconnectedness. This was evidenced by a funding corporate interviewee who credited the efforts of their CEO saying: "We wouldn't have got as far as we have in doing this work, if we had a different CEO who didn't believe in this and wasn't willing to give time and actually sit down in a room and take hard criticism" (Respondent 9). A SJO reinforced this sentiment with commentary that businesses did not understand how civil society organisations operate, because they have not *taken the time* to focus on this. Further to this, the same SJO raised a caution against business leadership outsourcing this responsibility to consultants, thus inadvertently entrenching the concept of disconnectedness.

The lack of dialogue as a platform of engagement was noted as a contributing factor of corporate disconnectedness. SJO respondents maintained that dialogue with social justice groups could improve corporate awareness in 'real-time' of social justice issues on the ground and harness the creativity of their multiple perspectives in developing social justice responsiveness: "If you create that space and have that dialogue, the ideas will flow. Businesses themselves may not be able to think it through but talking to others may help them to do so" (Respondent 7). One corporate interviewee observed though that dialogue may be difficult for corporates where it required them to relinquish some of their power, "and be willing to listen and change what they do, and that's hard for them" (Respondent 9). Thus, the theme of disconnectedness suggests a need for corporates to re-evaluate more critically their accessibility and connectivity.

4.6 Business purpose: Understanding of the business role in society

The idea of business purpose relates to the way a business views its role in society and recognises this will ultimately determine its engagement in social justice and social justice advocacy. Different views regarding the role of business suggest that (i) differing world views on business purpose will cause contrasting expectations and tensions around how business should function within society, (ii) particularly where this responsibility extends into the socio-political domain such as social justice advocacy, (iii) and that ultimately leadership ethics and values are the key determinants, which shape an underlying business philosophy.

Differing views were noted relating to the purpose of business. As example, one funding corporate maintained that "business is about society and for society" (Respondent 4), whereas another non-funding corporate stated that social justice issues were not relevant to their industry, hence their non-involvement. Another corporate (Respondent 5) questioned the societal role of business in relation to government, saying that "there is a lack of clarity regarding the roles of public and private sector relating to social responsibility". One SJO observed that there are different economic and political world views between civil society and the private sector using the example that businesses believed markets "could provide everything", whereas civil society called for government intervention and regulation for markets to operate more effectively (Respondent 10).

More specific to the purpose of business, findings suggest the *political role of business* as an actor in the public sphere is ill-defined and not well understood by corporates. This may lead to avoidance and non-engagement by corporates in areas relating to socio-political activity such as social justice advocacy. A similarity in views was noted between the funding corporates and SJOs where both groups interpreted corporate political responsibility as an enabler of democracy, thereby creating a positive business environment. One funding corporate respondent expressed the following criticism:

> South African corporations do not place a high enough value on the benefits they get from operating within a constitutional democracy. And so they don't understand that it is a public good, and therefore there's a market failure in funding it and they have a responsibility to make a contribution. (Respondent 9)

On this topic, the role of robust stakeholder engagement was emphasised to mitigate against corporate influence in the public sphere. In this regard, corporates' relationship with civil society is one that may warrant close examination, particularly where this relationship intersects in areas of socio-political issues, such as democracy-building.

Leadership ethics were identified as an integral factor in shaping a business's operating world view. An SJO interviewee noted the critical role leadership plays "in terms of people being able to see the bigger picture and recognising the role of business in broader society" (Respondent 7). The topic of leadership values was noted in two areas relating specifically to (i) engaging with social responsibility at an ethical level, and (ii) adopting a long-term approach to business. One funding corporate interviewee summed up the view that boardroom values ultimately have a more definitive influence over a company than compliance to legislation. "You can legislate as much as you like, but unless you actually have a transformation of values in boardrooms and in executive management, you won't be able to solve it only through the stick of legislation" (Respondent 9).

5. Conclusions

The major findings of this study identified six interrelated factors, which together, act as inhibitors of corporate engagement with social justice advocacy. These factors point to a fundamental lack of understanding of the social justice terrain, a fear of reputational risk, a pursuit of short-term profit rather than sustainable profit, a compliance approach to regulatory and governance requirements, a disconnectedness from their operating environment, and recognition that business' purpose will ultimately determine their societal engagement. An understanding of these corporate-held views and fears around social justice advocacy affords opportunities for both corporates and civil society organisations to engage constructively on this topic, to thereby extend CSR relevance and responsiveness.

The meta-findings recognise there are inherent tensions around CSR engagement with social justice concepts. These interrelating tensions ultimately point to (i) the fundamental role of responsible business in society; (ii) the responsible use of corporate power within the public sphere; and (iii) the importance of corporate accountability and accessibility. Faced with these ethical and philosophical tensions, we argue that corporates must indeed engage with social justice advocacy, however, should do so responsibly as part of their regular business practice, and within the context of meaningful multi-stakeholder discourse with civil society and other societal actors. This shifts the debate from whether corporates should engage with social justice advocacy, to mindfully determining how they should do so. This view resonates with the growing body of work on corporate social justice and politically responsible corporate citizenship (WEF, 2021; Zheng, 2020; Tempels et al., 2017; Scherer et al., 2014; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006),

Going forward, the manner and perspective with which corporates define and manage their stakeholder engagement processes warrants more robust examination. Without representation, key sectors of society such as social justice organisations are rendered voiceless within the business-society discourse, and corporates run the risk of becoming disassociated from critical societal pressure points, and more seriously, distancing themselves from accountability processes. To this point, Scherer and Palazzo (2007) expand on the practice of discursive CSR precisely to enhance a firm's *contextual sensitivity* as an embedded corporation. Likewise, Tempels et al. (2017) and Newell and Frynas (2007) speak to the *importance of process* that CSR engagements should address impacts of corporate practice and irresponsibility. Engagements such as the WEF's Lighthouse Action on Social Justice through Stakeholder Inclusion (2021) seek to address social justice issues through greater inclusion (by both public and private sectors) of often marginalised and ignored stakeholders.

Evidence points to an ongoing need to engage, educate and challenge corporate leaders on the CSR–social justice discourse. Management education is integral to shaping business practice, and importantly, in shaping an ethical business–society understanding. This work embodies the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) to integrate sustainability awareness into management education, and advance the UNGC's (2014) goals to develop future sustainability leadership and boards of directors. Where accessibility to engage business leaders remains a challenge, academic institutions, business schools and research think-tanks can play a vital role to create spaces for deliberation, by bringing together business leaders, civil society groups and other social actors in a supported dialogue process. Business forums such as the South African National Business Initiative (NBI) and related industry seminars can offer valuable platforms to engage corporate decision-makers. By extension, although beyond the scope of this article, education on social justice and responsible business practice should also reach into sectors such as the asset management industry, ESG investment ratings agencies and industry regulators given the influence these actors wield.

Further areas of study can examine the corporate–civil society relationship, in terms of how corporates understand or recognise the value of this relationship, particularly where their CSR work extends into the socio-political arena. Research could examine the basis on which corporates determine the materiality of their societal stakeholders, whether there is inclusion of social justice groups, and how contestation for inclusion as a material stakeholder is managed. More particularly, whether intersectional engagements with multi-societal stakeholders are conducted, and how societal stakeholder feedback is constructively 'centred' into CSR strategy (WEF, 2021; Sangokoya, 2021; Zheng, 2020; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).

The limitations of this work acknowledge that there are broader political and economic systems which contribute to systemic poverty and inequality. As such, we recognise social justice advocacy as a development mechanism which should be situated within a responsible CSR strategy, and supported through ethical leadership and good governance. Additionally, these findings are situated within a single country with a particular socio-political context and regulatory corporate framework. Lastly, while the qualitative method employed in this study provided rich research material relating to corporate and SJO motivation, the size of the sample and scope of interviews engaged preclude a claim to any exhaustive statements on the topic but may nevertheless offer a useful platform for future work using various methodologies.

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