

## **CHALLENGES OF BUSINESS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CONDITIONS OF CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

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### **Abstract**

*The article provides discussion of the issues of increase of social responsibility of businesses in the conditions of coronavirus pandemics. The discussion deals with three areas: compliance with the requirements of marketing ethics; environment protection; participation in dealing with the social problems. The authors of this article regard that in the conditions of coronavirus pandemics, Georgian businesses operate based on effective legislation. In addition, mostly, they show good will and observe the moral and ethical norms. Certainly, businesses will not be controlled in this respect but the owners and managers clearly understand the role of positive image for effective operation. And following of the moral principles plays significant role for positive image. In the sphere of natural environment, based on analysis of the current situation, the conclusion was made that there is need to increase corporate responsibility. The authors regard that improvement of each citizen's responsibility in the sphere of natural environment is no less significant, requiring activation of the state structures and NGOs. In the opinion of the authors, increase of the role of businesses in dealing with the social problem facing the population would be helpful not only for the people engaged in businesses, also the consumers and entire society, in recovery of the material and moral damages caused by the coronavirus pandemics.*

**Keywords:** *social responsibility, coronavirus pandemics, marketing ethics, environment protection*

**JEL Classification:** *M10, M14, M21*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Currently the world faces the greatest global problem in a form of coronavirus pandemics. Over one year has passed but the problem is not dealt with yet. Number of infected with coronavirus grow daily all over the world. While absolute majority of the infected recovered, number of those who died is not low. Situation is similar in Georgia. World community clearly understands that this greatest challenge can be overcome with joint efforts only. In addition, coronavirus pandemics cannot be defeated only by medical personnel, state structures and international organizations. It is vital that businesses and each individual activated in the fight against coronavirus pandemics. In this respect activation of businesses is decisive. This is not an easily solvable problem, as pandemics caused significant difficulties to the businesses. We can say that almost all spheres of business were affected to greater or lesser extent but there is no any other way. In our opinion, without further increase of social responsibility of business coronavirus pandemics cannot be dealt with by the society. For some reason, "both, public opinion and business companies regard corporate responsibility should be borne by more or less large firms" (Khoperoa & Chkheidze, 2018). This is not the case. We support the opinion that such attitude to corporate responsibility is the "result of improper understanding" (Khoperoa & Chkheidze, 2018). In addition, this is the fact that realization of corporate social responsibility yields positive results not for the society only; it is beneficial for the companies as well. As a rule, companies operating in responsible manner have positive image in public and this positively affect the results of their work – sales and generated profits grow. Certainly, in such situation the companies should think about increase their social responsibility to the society and taking advantage of the results obtained in such way.

Thus, for the large, medium and small companies performing their business with social responsibility is indeed beneficial. For Georgia, activation of small and medium businesses, with respect of social responsibility is of decisive significance as most of the enterprises in the country are the ones of mentioned category. Since 2017, in the country ranking is applied, according to which, average annual number of the employees and annual turnover of the small enterprise shall not exceed 50 employees and GEL 12 million and those of the medium enterprise – 249 employees and GEL 60 million – respectively (Business Sector in Georgia 2020, p. 14).

Currently, in Georgia, the greatest part of the population is employees of the small enterprises. Thus, for example, by 2019, 339.152 people were employees of small enterprises, 152.156 – employees of the medium ones and 265.184 people were employed at the large enterprises (Business Sector in Georgia 2020, p. 109). Situation is absolutely different with respect of trade turnover for the enterprises of different sizes. In that year trade turnover in the country was GEL 109.024.3 million (Business Sector in Georgia 2020, p. 27). Turnover of large enterprises is 55.5% of total trade turnover (GEL 60.504.6), that of the medium enterprises comprises 19.3% (GEL 21.065.6 million) and small enterprises account for only 25.2% (GEL 27.454.2 million). I.e. role of the medium and small enterprises was significant with respect of both, population employment (65%) and trade turnover (44.5%). In such situation, operation of the small and medium enterprises with social responsibility can greatly contribute to achievement of the country's sustainable development and elimination of the coronavirus pandemics. Certainly, work of such enterprises with the social responsibility positively affect lives of over 490 thousand people and their family members and beyond the enterprises they will play significant role in environment protection and dealing with the problems. Today, when coronavirus pandemics still persist, UNICEF regards that children all over the world require their parents' support and the parents need assistance from their employers. UNICEF has published the article (Seven Ways, 2020) describing key measures to be implemented by the businesses in the situation of pandemics to assist their staff. Businesses "moving along these ways" the businesses would help their employees to care about themselves, their children and other family members.

In our opinion, information about the articles of such type should be regularly provided to businesses. This would contribute to activation of businesses with respect of work with social responsibility, as this would allow providing proper awareness of the management of medium and small businesses and their employees in the substance of social responsibility and its benefits for the entire society. This, in turn, requires activation of the governmental structures and NGOs, for advocacy of work with social responsibility and its benefits. Work is commenced but, in our opinion, more interest and seeking of the new ways are required to activate work of the businesses with social responsibility. This is especially significant today, regarding that the owners and managers of some enterprises, while verbally recognizing necessity of fight against coronavirus pandemics, in reality, frequently, act just oppositely.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To clarify current views about the issues of necessity of business operation with social responsibility and the practical situation, we have applied general research methods, in particular analysis and synthesis, as well as marketing method of quantitative research – observation. On the basis of logical reasoning, from the literary sources created about the mentioned issue, we have identified and studied the images, as well as legal framework, related to social responsibility of business in the situation of coronavirus pandemics that are significant in our opinion. To evaluate the outcomes of operation of business in socially responsible manner, where required, we have used the indices developed by the international organizations. In the process of work on the article we have also relied on various publications describing existing situation. Role of theoretical-methodological basis for the article was performed by our articles published earlier, as well as the works by the other authors (Mghebrishvili, B., 2010; Mghebrishvili, B., 2014; Mghebrishvili, B. and Urotadze, E., 2016; Todua, N., Mghebrishvili, B., and Urotadze, E., 2016; Chiladze, 2017; Todua, 2018; Todua and Jachi, 2018; Todua & Mghebrishvili, 2018; Mghebrishvili, 2018; Mghebrishvili, 2019; Todua, 2019; Mghebrishvili, 2020; Mghebrishvili B., Mghebrishvili A., and Atoshvili, 2020).

## **III. RESEARCH RESULTS**

Corporative social responsibility is applied in several areas (what is corporative social responsibility, 2018). In our opinion, today, in the situation of coronavirus pandemics, the following types of business social responsibility are of particular significance:

- Active compliance with the requirements of marketing ethics;
- More attention to the environment protection issues;
- Participation in dealing with the social problems in the community.

Marketing ethics implying behavior standards and moral values of the people engaged in business sometimes are left without attention. Naturally, requirement of ethical behavior is not applicable to the marketing specialists and top managers only, it is obligation of each individual engaged in business. As it is known, marketing ethics similarly to ethics, generally, is based on two principles. According to the first principle, "behavior norms in business must be based on free market and legal system, According to the second principle, each enterprise and its marketing managers must develop their own conception of social responsibility and moral behavior that would promote internal integrity, corporative conscience and, in long run, ensuring welfare of the consumers (Todua, N., and Mghebrishvili, B., 2009). In our opinion, in Georgian businesses the first principle is

basically complied with. The enterprises make efforts to correspond to the requirements of the legal system, as, in case of non-compliance, they will bear responsibility and be subjected to sanctions. In all normal countries there is the legislation regulating businesses and placing them into the legal framework.

Certainly, such legislation is developed and operates in Georgia as well. After signature of Association Agreement the legislation regulating business is further refined and approached to EU legislation. The laws requires that the consumers shall be supplied with safe products and properly informed about their properties and usage (Mghebrishvili, B. and Urotadze, E., 2016; Todua, N., Mghebrishvili, B. and Urotadze, 2016; Todua N. and Mghebrishvili, B., 2018; Mghebrishvili, B., 2018). Among the legislation regulating business in Georgia, we would like to mention the following normative acts: Law of Georgia – Product Safety and Free Movement Code, Food Products/Animal Feed Safety, Veterinary and Plant Protection Code; Georgian Law on the Rules of Labeling of the Genetically Modified Organisms and their Genetically Modified Products Intended for Food / Animal Feed; Technical Regulations on the Rules of Food Labeling – Providing Information to the Consumers. In addition to the above normative acts, there are numerous regulations and normative acts ensuring proper operation of various spheres of business. Naturally, there are certain non-compliances, though the violators are punished according to the requirements of the law. We should emphasize that sometimes even the businesses operating within the legal framework can cause harm to the people.

Though, business is controlled for the second principle of marketing ethics. Operation complying with this principle is the good will of the businesses. Though, businesses must take into consideration the fact that neglecting of the moral and ethical norms can cause significant damages to them. Morally and ethically improper actions undermine the image of business and most enterprises understand this; though, these are mostly large companies. As mentioned above, small and medium enterprises regard that only large businesses are able to work in socially responsible manner while this is completely wrong. Hence, it is clear that for improvement of the society’s moral level activation of the work is required from the side of state authorities and NGOs. And this is indeed vital today. In the conditions of political instability, economic crisis and coronavirus pandemics, moral values of many individuals were dramatically undermined and this can be easily seen from social networks. “Insensitiveness to one-another’s pain and mercilessness” became quite usual condition of many individuals. Naturally, such individuals conduct their businesses with similar approach, rather than complying with the requirements of marketing ethics. Work should be activated not only by the governmental authorities and nongovernmental structures but by the relevant specialists as well.

In contemporary world social responsibility of businesses in the sphere of environment protection gradually expands. Work in this area has commenced in independent Georgia long ago. As early as in 1996, the Law on Environment Protection was adopted. After adoption, this law was significantly changed, especially when the Association Agreement with EU was signed. Code of Wastes Management plays significant role in ensuring of environment protection. Through compliance with the requirements of both above laws, Georgia can protect the natural resources so that the future generations were able to ensure meeting of their demands. Though many things were done in the sphere of environment protection in the country, the indices characterizing actual situation show that the situation is still unsatisfactory. To evidence this, we can provide some indices calculated by the international organizations. One of the components (sub-indices) of prosperity index calculated by Legatum Institute located in London by countries is the environment protection index. Regarding this index, in 2016-2017, Georgia was not at good positions, in both years Georgia was 124<sup>th</sup> among 149 countries (Mghebrishvili, B., 2019). In 2018-2019, situation in Georgia, regarding this index, initially improved and further – worsened.

Though, by year 2020, the situation improved in the country. It moved to 115<sup>th</sup> position among 169 countries with respect of environment protection [The Legatum Prosperity Index<sup>tm</sup>2020], while in 2018, it was at 122<sup>nd</sup> position and in 2019 – at 142<sup>nd</sup> (The Legatum Prosperity Index<sup>tm</sup>: 2018& 2019). While situation in environment protection sphere has improved, compared with the previous years, it still remains quite poor in the country. That year, according to natural environment sub-index included into Legatum Prosperity Index, Georgia was behind of the most former soviet republics. So, by 2020, by Legatum Prosperity Index, in natural environment sphere, Latvia was at 7<sup>th</sup> position, Estonia was 10<sup>th</sup>, Lithuania – 24<sup>th</sup>, Kyrgyzstan – 65<sup>th</sup>. Russia – 77<sup>th</sup>, Belarus – 82<sup>nd</sup>, Armenia – 91<sup>st</sup>, Kazakhstan – 104<sup>th</sup> and Ukraine – 110<sup>th</sup>. Only Azerbaijan, Moldova, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were at lower positions than Georgia. They were rated as 136<sup>th</sup>, 140<sup>th</sup>, 150<sup>th</sup> and 157<sup>th</sup>, respectively (The Legatum Prosperity Index<sup>tm</sup>: 2020). Consequently, in our opinion, the conclusion can be made that there is much to be done in the sphere of environment protection in Georgia. While the legal framework for environment protection was developed, it should be complied with, not only by the governmental structures but also by the businesses and individuals. Social responsibility of businesses, in the sphere of natural environment, should be further improved. Each individual should not only protect the environment from contamination but also support the businesses in increase of interest to work with social responsibility. Each of the citizens should understand that by his/her choice in favor of healthy products in the process of shopping he/she contributes to further expansion of the socially responsible companies and their profitable work (Mghebrishvili, 2019).. In Georgia, interest to healthy food, with respect of maintenance of good health, is indeed

high (Todua, N., 2018; Todua, N. and Jashi, 2018; Todua, N., 2019; Mgebrishvili, B., 2019). Thus, the population is able to promote social responsibility of the businesses and this should be necessarily relied on. Sustainable consumption results in sustainable development (Mgebrishvili, B., 2020). Wide society should understand this and advocacy of the sustainable marketing principles can play significant role in this. Thus, consumer marketing should be sustainable as well and this would be a good lesson to be learned for the irresponsible companies and motivate them to perform their activities with social responsibility (Mgebrishvili, B., 2019).

Ensuring of natural environment protection requires improvement of awareness of the entire society and this can be achieved not by development of environmental legislation but rather by increasing entire society's interest towards environmental problems, One could say that the legislation will "remain as is", unless wide society acquires it. To cause the society's interest towards environment protection issues, it should be regularly informed so that environment protection became the part of everyday life of each individual. This is evidenced by questioning of the population (Mgebrishvili, B., Mgebrishvili, A. and Atoshvili, 2020)..

According to our observations, businesses do much more for environment protection than individuals while all recognize that environment protection is necessary. Some business owners and managers better and better understand that environment protection plays positive role in creation of their image and attempt to take advantage of this factor. One could say that for some people this is internal desire while for some this is the tool for creation of positive image. In any case, the country and entire society will benefit, irrespective of whether the steps for environment protection are made, in former case, for ethical or, in latter case, for the other reasons (Mgebrishvili, B., 2010).

One of significant types of social responsibility of businesses, as mentioned above, is degree of business participation in dealing with the social problems of the society. Today this is particularly significant, as for the entire world, the key problem is dealing with coronavirus pandemics. The businesses, if they have any opportunities, should activate their work in all three respects: economic, social and environmental. Outcomes of businesses' activation in social context will include "welfare of their employees, high degree of the consumers' satisfaction, safety of the products and services" (Khoperia & Chkheidze, 2018). Business operating with social responsibility excludes "gaining of profits" and "enrichment" at account of the own employees and consumers. In addition, it helps the employees to easily deal with the material and moral damages caused by pandemics. Businesses ensure achievement of the consumers' satisfaction by not only supplying safe products but by formation of the trustworthy pleasant atmosphere of relations with them.

Reasonable businessmen have realized long ago that caring about wellbeing of their employees and consumers, participation in dealing with the problems of entire society is not associated with the expenses only – it is beneficial for the business. They understand that their image depends not only on proper distribution of gained profits but also on the ways of generation of these profits. Social responsibility of business, primarily, implies proper selection of the ways and means for profits generation. If the business is performed in socially responsible manner, neither employees and nor consumers and entire society will be harmed. In such situation, finally, the business will gain benefits as well.

The company of any size can work with social responsibility. In addition, we support the position that conducting of business with social responsibility by small enterprises is not only possible but it is even easier. We imply better opportunities of identification and consideration of the employees' needs, compared with the larger enterprises. It is apparent, also, that the small enterprises, mostly, have closer contacts with their consumers, knowing that in the conditions of competition, they can survive if they maintain their consumers. I.e., mostly, the small enterprises make relationships with their employees and consumers in compliance with the social responsibility principles, though, frequently they do not even properly understand. In addition, it is apparent that small enterprises are less tended to engage in environmental issues. And number of such enterprises is much more than that of the medium and large enterprises. So, steps made by them for environment protection would be very beneficial for the country.

In the recent years, in Georgia, significant steps were made for promotion of conducting business with corporate social responsibility. Among them, we would like to emphasize contests for identification of the enterprises with social responsibility. By year 2021, in the conditions of coronavirus pandemics, contest "Meliora 2020" for identification of the enterprises working with social responsibility is conducted in different format. Contest terms and conditions were changed because of challenges related to COVID-19 and this was reflected in the name of the contest: Responsible Business and COVID-19". Competition is organized by the Center for Strategic Research and Development of Georgia (CSR DG), with EU and Kontad Adenauer Fund support. This contest is intended for identification of the companies implementing the projects and incentives within the scopes of corporate social responsibility, to fight against the crisis caused by coronavirus pandemics ([www.meliora.ge](http://www.meliora.ge)).

Private company of any size registered in Georgia can participate in the contest, civil organizations and state enterprises are ineligible for the contest. It is significant that the incentives and projects implemented by the companies are evaluated by their sizes, ensuring equal chances for large, medium and small enterprises.

According to the terms and conditions of the contest, “submitted project/incentive should suit to one of the four categories of the contest and reflect the company’s responsible actions in response to the crisis caused by COVID-19. These actions were performed by the company to support employees, consumers, clients, suppliers and the companies most severely damaged by the pandemics (www.meliora.ge). More specifically, four main categories of the contest include: supporting employees, supporting clients, customers and suppliers, supporting society/communities, supporting, supporting SMEs and most suffered industries.

In our opinion, number of the applications for participation in the contest (62 applications in total, in all categories) is quite low and shows that there is the need to further deepen work in this area. We imply both, increase of number of the socially responsible companies and causing of their interest, so that they were among the ones successfully operating in social respect and known to the entire society. In our opinion, such approach can further improve the social responsibility of the companies as the positive attitude of the public will stimulate the companies to further care about the interests of their employees, consumers and generally, entire society.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Based on study of the literature about social responsibility of business, relevant legal acts, as well as in-depth consideration of the necessity of corporate social responsibility in the situation of coronavirus pandemics and analysis of the existing situation in practice, in this area, we were able to make the following conclusions:

Work of the enterprises operation with social responsibility, on one hand, increases the costs and on the other – improves attitude of the employees, consumers and entire society to the enterprise’s activities. In such situation, irrespective of increase of costs, the situation is favorable for profitable operation. In Georgia, some people engaged in business have clearly realized this, promoting number of companies working with social responsibility.

Due to coronavirus pandemics, businesses face great problems. Part of the enterprises have suspended their operations while others continued their work online and some of them work at partial capacity and with certain periodicity. This situation has caused damages not only to businesses but to the employees and consumers as well. In our opinion, this made the issue of business operation with social responsibility even more significant. Primarily, this applies to the enterprises that managed to adapt with the new conditions and continue normal operation. Their obligation is to support the state and the society in their fight against pandemics. Today there is no any other way. Actually, they do this and there are many examples.

In the situation of coronavirus pandemics, work of businesses in compliance with the requirements of marketing ethics is of particular significance. Compliance with the requirements of marketing ethics, in legal respects, is compulsory. This is subject to control and the enterprises make efforts to adjust their work to the requirements of law. Compliance with the moral and ethical norms is good will of the enterprises. This cannot be controlled. Businesses can be activated in this respect through causing interest of their owners and managers. In Georgia such work is performed but more extensive efforts are required from the side of both, state and non-state structures. Businesses operating in compliance with the ethical norms should be regularly supported morally. Mass media should regularly inform the population about this, thus promoting sales of the socially responsible businesses.

In Georgia, natural environment condition is not satisfactory yet and requires further activation of work from the side of state and non-state structures. Wastes processing sector is very young in Georgia but includes many companies. They process paper, glass, plastic, tires etc., transforming them into the useful goods. State structures should work more actively in this area, to cause more interest of the businesses.

The state should provide moral stimulation of the enterprises that are active in dealing with the social problems facing the population.

Relevant structures (pre-school institutions, schools, colleges, higher education institutions, ministries, various services, NGOs) should be activated in the sphere of natural environment, to ensure involvement of greater number of people.

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