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Caterina Cavicchi, Emidia Vagnoni

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# Does management control for sustainable development support TSEs funding? Some insights from the Italian context

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Caterina Cavicchi, PhD

Researcher

Department of Economics and Management, University of Ferrara. Italy

Emidia Vagnoni, PhD

Full Professor of

Economia Aziendale

Department of Economics and Management, University of Ferrara. Italy

**Corresponding Author:**

Caterina Cavicchi

*caterina.cavicchi@unife.it*

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SPECIAL ISSUE

**ABSTRACT**

Literature has called to investigate sustainability management control and reporting in third sector entities (TSEs), and how these tools can provide support to attract funds to these organizations for survival and growth. To address these gaps, a questionnaire survey has been administered to a sample of 4000 TSEs to investigate to what extent they are using planning and control systems to measure and report sustainable development (SD) information to attract funds, in front of major donors' sensitivity around SD. As from the results, the adoption of sustainability initiatives in TSEs is weakly impacted by the donors' sensitivity around SD; nevertheless, in TSEs adopting SD initiatives, the increase in the use of integrated management accounting, combining both financial and sustainability information is highly correlated to SD sensitivity of donors. The paper adds to the literature of sustainability reporting of TSEs and contribute to practice, underlying the main criticalities TSEs face in using planning and control systems to support funding activities, especially in the light of SD sensitive donors.

La letteratura ha invitato a indagare il controllo di gestione della sostenibilità e la rendicontazione negli enti del terzo settore (ETS), e come questi strumenti possano fornire supporto a queste organizzazioni per attrarre fondi al fine di favorirne la sopravvivenza e la crescita. Per colmare queste lacune, è stata avviata un'indagine somministrando un questionario a un campione di 4000 ETS per indagare in che misura stiano utilizzando sistemi di pianificazione e controllo per misurare e comunicare le informazioni sullo sviluppo sostenibile (SS) per attrarre fondi, di fronte alla sensibilità dei principali donatori nei confronti dello SS. Come rivelano i risultati, l'adozione di iniziative di sostenibilità negli ETS è debolmente influenzata dalla sensibilità dei donatori nei confronti della SS; tuttavia, nelle ETS che adottano iniziative di SS, l'aumento dell'uso della contabilità di gestione integrata, che combina informazioni finanziarie e di sostenibilità, è altamente correlato alla sensibilità dei donatori in materia di SS. L'articolo si aggiunge alla letteratura di rendicontazione di sostenibilità degli ETS e contribuisce alla pratica, evidenziando le principali criticità degli ETS nell'utilizzo di sistemi di pianificazione e controllo a supporto delle attività di finanziamento, soprattutto alla luce dei donatori sensibili allo SS.

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**Keywords:** Management control; third sector entities; sustainable development; funding; donors

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## 1 – Introduction

Third Sector Reform and the subsequent implementing decrees have paved the way for the social impact assessment (SIA) by third sector entities (TSEs). When defining SIA, the ministerial guidelines of 2019 has also included the “sustainability of the social action” as an element to be assessed and communicated to stakeholders by TSEs (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2019). Furthermore, while it is recognized that sustainable development (SD) may affects donors’ choice to fund TSEs, studies investigating TSEs’ capacity to attract funds thanks to SD initiatives are still lacking (Gazzola *et al.*, 2021). Previous research has underlined that the higher the number of funds obtained, the lower the level of accountability achieved by TSEs in their sustainability reports (Gazzola *et al.*, 2021). In addition, to what extent such organizations are using their management control systems to monitor and report the results of their SD strategies in front of their donors’ information needs requires more deepening (Cavicchi, 2023). In fact, literature has shown that TSEs do not use management control to support their strategies (Montanini & D’Andrea, 2020; Castellini, 2014). Nevertheless, scholars have called TSEs to develop an entrepreneurial mindset (Gibb & Adhikary, 2000), to develop multidimensional control systems enabling value-related and sustainability strategies (Pavan, 2019; Marchi, 2019; 2020), and to develop a more integrated accountability (Andreus & Costa, 2014).

To address these gaps, a survey questionnaire has been sent to a sample of about 4000 TSEs belonging to the RUNTS, to investigate to what extent they are implementing, monitoring, and communicating the undertaken sustainability initiatives to their donors, using their management control systems, and to what extent these latter are able to support the TSEs’ strategies to attract funds. From a practical perspective, the paper can provide recommendations to help TSEs engage in the transition towards SD, to contribute to their own well-being and that of communities in achieving their social mission, in line with the *mission-governance-accountability* paradigm characterizing these organizations (Matacena, 2012). From the theoretical perspective, it aims at contributing at defining the characteristics and role performed by sustainability management control and reporting in TSEs.

## 2 – Literature review

Planning and control systems should help TSEs in monitoring the consistency between the resources spent and the value produced; in facts, cost-effectiveness it is a necessary but not sufficient condition to satisfy the social mission they pursue. In this regard, a major focus on the produced social value and the ability to measure and report it have been pushed by the Third Sector Reform, aimed at introducing: a) social reporting obligations for some kinds of TSEs, and b) social impact assessment for those TSEs that are awarded of the management of public services. This reform has been deemed to increase TSEs’ accountability in front of their stakeholders, through a major use of management control systems (Berardi *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, TSEs still experience impediments in the adoption of assessment tools, which is mainly affected by the lack of key human resources and performance measurement skills (Manetti & Toccafondi, 2014; Ricciuti and Calò, 2018).

To allow greater accountability, the pursuing of coherence among *social mission*, *governance*, and *accountability* (Matacena, 2008; 2012) should be supported by multidimensional control systems composed of economic and financial control, legitimacy control and social effectiveness control, which are interdependent and complementary (Santi, 2002; Matacena, 2002; Berardi & Rea, 2009). Recent emphasis has been put by scholars on the social effectiveness control which

is aimed at verifying the ability of the TSEs to respond to societal needs, through a system of inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts indicators (Bagnoli & Megali, 2011; Zamagni *et al.*, 2015). If on the one hand, TSEs are called to account for the expenditure of the resources entrusted to them, on the other they should be accountable for the impacts generated on the community (Rea & Berardi, 2020; Marchi, 2019; 2020). Through shared accountability mechanisms, TSEs can secure funds which are needed for their survival (Cavicchi & Vagnoni, 2022).

From the point of view of the relationship between planning and control systems and accountability systems, there is a need to forge multidimensional control systems aimed at capturing the accountability needs of a multiplicity of stakeholders, including beneficiaries and donors. In fact, sustainability reporting adoption may positively affect the introduction of tools to measure SD performance in line with stakeholders' expectations, thus supporting strategic planning when SD information is used for decision-making (Manetti and Toccafondi, 2014; Vermiglio, 2010). In this regard, SD reporting will be key for competitiveness of non-profit entities due to an increase in the social demand (Gazzola *et al.*, 2017).

Then, socio-economic sustainability in a competitive environment (McDonald *et al.*, 2015) is becoming increasingly dependent to the ability to fulfil donors' information needs regarding these matters (Gazzola *et al.*, 2017). However, when examining the role of management control systems in supporting TSEs' performance management activities, we assist at a poor link between strategy definition and use of management control systems by TSEs (Montanini & D'Andrea, 2020; Castellini, 2014).

Furthermore, sustainability reporting in these organizations is still in its infancy, thus compromising their ability to respond to stakeholders' information needs, including the donors' ones (Traxler *et al.*, 2020; Gazzola *et al.*, 2021). To what extent TSEs are using their management control systems to monitor and report SD in front of their donors' information needs, thus requires major investigation (Gazzola *et al.*, 2021; Cavicchi & Vagnoni, 2022; Cavicchi, 2023). In addition, the use of such systems to support planning activities, including the attraction of funds is of interest. As a result, the study aims at investigating to what extent TSEs are using planning and control systems to measure and report SD information to attract funds from public and private donors.

### 3 – Methodology

To address the research questions, a survey questionnaire has been sent to a sample of about 4000 TSEs listed on the RUNTS (Registro Nazionale Enti del Terzo Settore). The questionnaire was composed by three sections.

The *first section* aimed at collecting general information on the surveyed TSEs (type, size and activities carried out) and the kind of funds they predominantly rely on.

The *second section* aimed at comprehending whether TSEs were adopting SD initiatives, to what extent they perceived their donors to be sensitive to SD issues, and to what extent they were using management control tools for managerial functions (planning, control and reporting for sustainability in order to attract resources). In this regard, indicators to measure SD performance were mainly taken by the *GRI G4 NGO Sector Disclosures* and the document *Il bilancio sociale. La rendicontazione sociale del non profit – Documenti di ricerca n. 10* from the Gruppo di Studio per il Bilancio Sociale (2009).

The *third section* aimed at investigating to what extent TSEs were adopting planning and control tools to attract resources. In terms of structure, the questionnaire included both yes/no questions to investigate the extent to what TSEs were adopting and measuring SD initiatives considering donors' potential sensitivity to SD, and questions on 7-points Likert Scale to investigate the respondents' use of planning and control systems to collect SD information that could help the TSE to attract funds.

The questionnaire was administered using Qualtrics software package, to the email address of the person that was in charge of managerial functions within the identified TSEs (i.e. President, General Manager, etc.), in the period of June-September, 2023. The questionnaire is visible in the appendix. Several programmed recalls were made to increase the response rate. The obtained responses were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics' techniques; these latter included binomial logistic regression, Spearman's raw correlations, and mean tests (Mann-Whitney U test for mean differences) (Field, 2008). Furthermore, non-respondent bias was controlled.

## 4 – Results

Results are discussed with reference to the characteristics of the respondents (Section 4.1), the impact of donors' SD sensitivity on adoption of sustainability initiatives (Section 4.2), and the use of planning and control tools from TSEs adopting SD initiatives (Section 4.3).

### 4.1 – Characteristics of the respondents

The response rate was about 7% (269 respondents). The 42% of respondents were associations of social promotion, the 26% were voluntary organizations, the 19,3% were social enterprises. Philanthropic organizations were a residual part of the respondents (0,7%) as well as mutual aid societies (0,4%) and association networks (0,4%). Other organizations were about the 10,8%. In this regard, the size of the investigated TSEs, in terms of associate members and employees, was coherent with the kind of organizations characterizing the sample of respondents. Most of the TSEs have 50 or more associate members (36%); the 27% have from 6 to 20 associate members, while the 19% from 21 to 50.

There's also a 17% of TSEs who have no associate members. Most respondents were not adopting personnel (37%) and the 22% had less than 5 employees, in line with the kind of organizations composing the sample. The 27% had up to 6 employees (15% had 5 to 20 employees; the 6% from 21 to 50, and the 6% more than 50).

Figure 1 shows the kind of activities performed by the analysed TSEs. Most of them were active in culture and recreational activities (35%), training and research (27%) and healthcare services provision (16%).

When focusing on funding they rely on, most of the funds (52%) comes from own entrances (revenues from commercialization of products and services (23%) and membership fees (29%)). Smaller amount of funds comes from private donors (25%) and the public sector (23%). Funding has mainly a local dimension (65%), while national and international funding is about 32%.

### 4.2 – Impact of donors' SD sensitivity on adoption of sustainability initiatives

Binomial logistic regression model was applied to test whether the donors' sensitivity towards SD was impacting TSEs' adoption of sustainability initiatives. As from Table 1, the logistic regression model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 11,704$ ,  $p = .001$ .

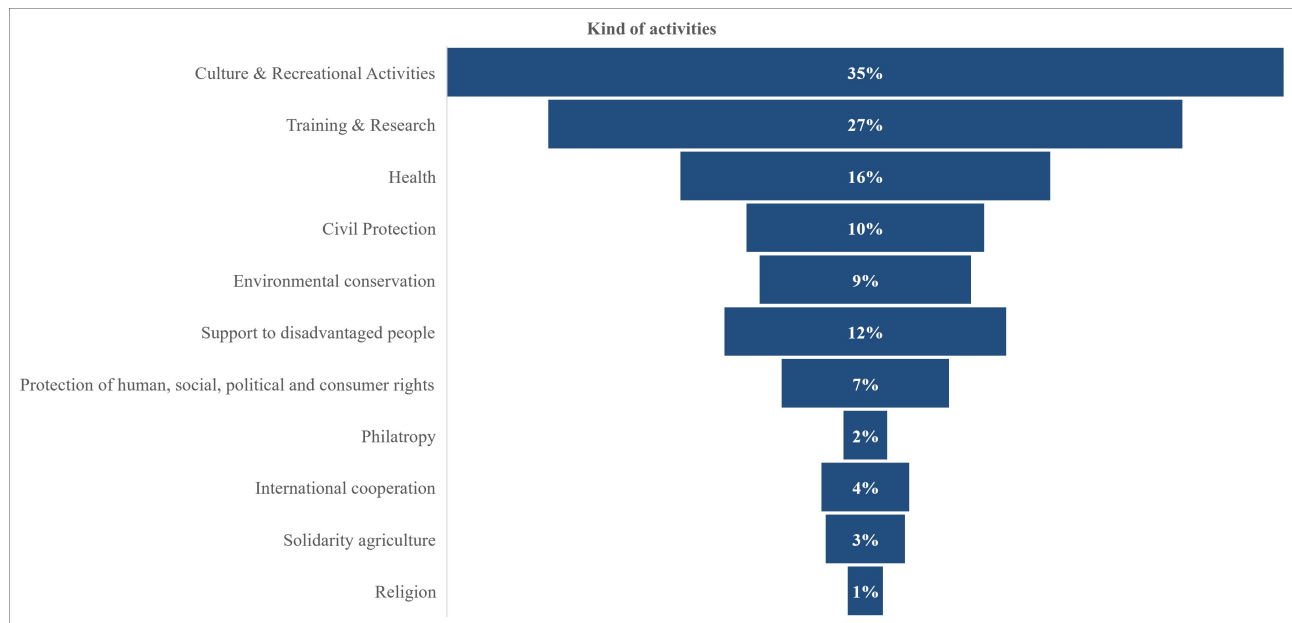


Fig. 1 – Kind of activities

Table 1 – Impact of donors' SD sensitivity on adoption of sustainability initiatives (logistic regression model)

Model Summary			
Step	-2 Log Likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	227,866 <sup>a</sup>	,065	,087

The model explained 8,7% (Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup>) of the variance in SD adoption and correctly classified 61.1% of cases. Hosmer & Lemeshow Test showed a level of significance higher than the 0,05, and equal to 0,386, and avoided a risk of model misspecification. In conclusion, while the relation between the predictor and the outcome was weak, *increasing SD sensitivity of donors was associated with an increased likelihood of adopting SD initiatives* (Beta equal to 0,316;  $p = 0,001^{***}$ ).

Table 2 – Provides the value of the variables in the model equation.

Variables in the Equation									
		B	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sign.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Inferior	Superior
Step 1	SD Sensitivity of Donors	,312	,094	10,893	1	,001	1,366	1,135	1,644
	Constant	-1,135	,450	6,362	1	,012	,321		



### 4.3 – The use of planning and control tools from TSEs adopting SD initiatives

All the items related to planning and control showed a Cronbach's Alpha greater than 0,90, demonstrating the reliability of the scale adopted. As from the results of the Mann Whitney U test (Table 3), those TSEs adopting SD initiatives are more prone to use strategic plans to identify opportunity for organizational development ( $p$ -value = 0,03 less than 0,05 level of significance), and crowdfunding campaigns to attract funds from donors ( $p$ -value = 0,038 less than 0,05 level of significance). On the contrary, they are not using more dedicated management control systems compared to those TSEs that are not engaging in SD.

**Table 3 – Results of the Mann Whitney U test**

Test statistics										
	Management control systems to monitor the attraction of funds	Management control systems to monitor costs for funding campaigns	Management control systems to monitor the attracted resources per kind of donor	Management control systems to monitor outcomes	Partnerships' monitoring to secure funds	Strategic planning to attract funds and allow the organization's sustainability	Business planning activities	Strategic planning for organizational development	Financial Planning	Crowdfunding
Mann-Whitney U	2132,000	2232,000	1884,500	2046,500	1923,500	1935,000	1795,500	1757,000	1672,000	1748,500
Wilcoxon W	3510,000	3772,000	3262,500	3477,500	3301,500	3366,000	3121,500	3242,000	2947,000	3074,500
Z	-,594	-,692	-1,592	-1,252	-1,313	-1,435	-1,841	-2,167	-1,826	-2,071
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	,553	,489	,111	,210	,189	,151	,066	,030*	,068	,038*
Grouping variable: SD Initiatives' Adoption; * significant at 0,05 level										

Focusing on the sole TSEs that are adopting and measuring SD initiatives (14%), a positive correlation between the perception of SD sensitivity of donors and the adoption of dedicated SD management control systems was found (Table 4).

More in depth, SD sensitivity of donors was positively correlated with the adoption of SD performance measurement ( $r_s=,562$ ;  $p = 0,002^{**}$ ), the ability to integrate accounting information with the sustainability one (integrated management accounting) to take decisions ( $r_s=0,534$ ;  $p = 0,005^{**}$ ), and the adoption of SD reporting to communicate SD performance to stakeholders ( $r_s = 0,411$ ;  $p = 0,041^*$ ).

Figure 2 shows the most measured and reported items with reference to SD matters. As from the figure all the items, except for hiring and personnel turnover, were above the mean of the Likert scale, showing a good ability to measure and communicate SD to stakeholders. Among the most disclosed items, one can find waste production and disposal, co-projecting initiatives,

outputs (n. beneficiaries per kind of product/service offered; number of products and services offered; number of products/services with low environmental impact; n. of advocacy initiatives) and diversity and inclusion indicators.

**Table 4 – Spearman’s rho correlation**

Spearman’s Rho Correlation		<i>SD Sensitivity of Donors</i>
	Correlation Coefficient	<b>,562**</b>
	SD Performance Measurement Sign. (2-Tailed)	<b>,002</b>
	N	27
	Correlation Coefficient	<b>,534**</b>
	SD Reporting Sign. (2-Tailed)	<b>,005</b>
	N	26
	Correlation Coefficient	<b>,340</b>
SD Management Control to attract funds Sign. (2-Tailed)	<b>,082</b>	
N	27	
Correlation Coefficient	<b>,266</b>	
SD Management Control to improve SD performance Sign. (2-Tailed)	<b>,171</b>	
N	28	
Correlation Coefficient	<b>,318</b>	
Attracted resources based on SD initiatives Sign. (2-Tailed)	<b>,113</b>	
N	26	
Correlation Coefficient	<b>,411*</b>	
Integrated management accounting Sign. (2-Tailed)	<b>,041</b>	
N	25	
** Correlation is significant at 0,01 level; *Correlation is significant at 0,05 level		

## 5 – Discussion

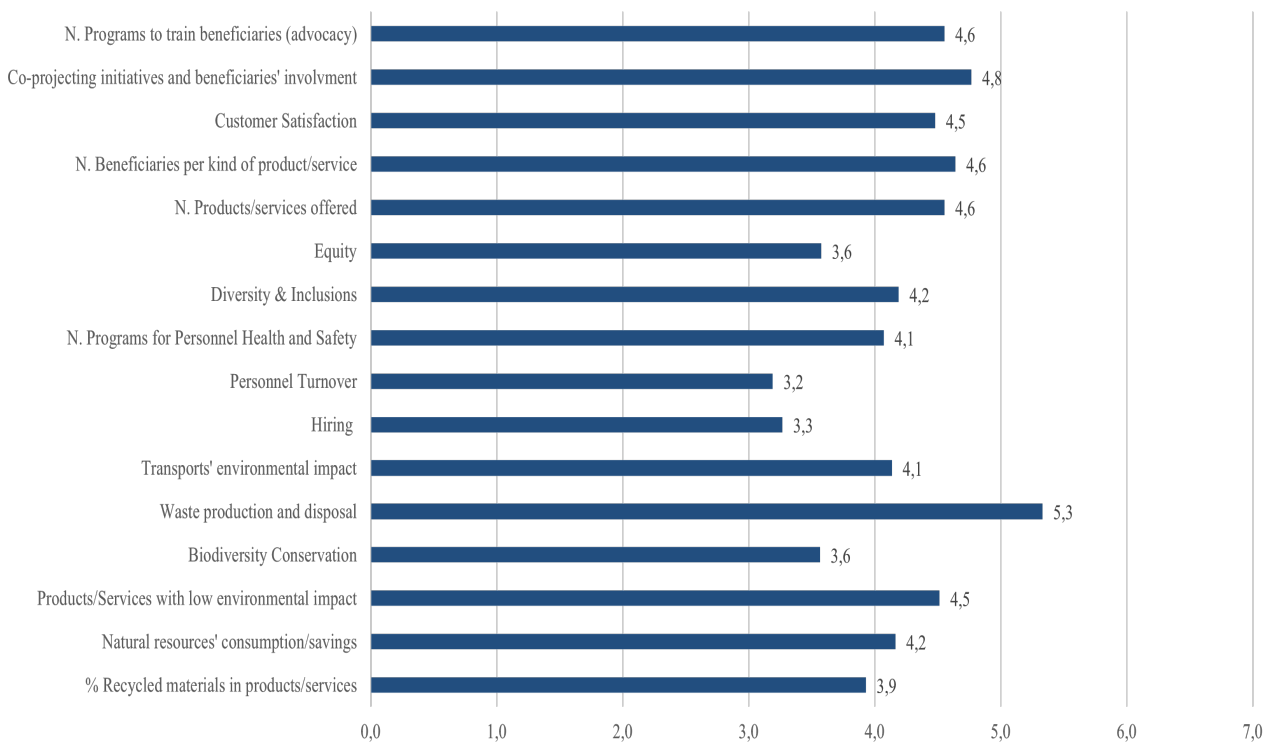
Results show a growing interest of donors towards sustainable SD principle, so that SD may become a relevant criterium for them to provide funds to TSEs. In line with donors’ requirements, TSEs are increasingly implementing SD projects and activities; nevertheless, these latter’ ability to measure sustainability using their planning and control systems to attract funds is not different from those TSEs that are not adopting SD initiatives, except for strategic planning and crowdfunding activities. This can bring difficulties in the attraction of funds from which TSEs are highly dependent for survival. On the contrary, those TSEs adopting SD initiatives (the



minority of the respondents' sample), have achieved a good ability to control and report for SD initiatives; this ability increases with the perception that donors are increasingly sensitive to SD matters, and is supported by using integrated management control systems.

## 6 – Conclusions

From a practical perspective, the paper can provide recommendations to help TSEs engage in the transition towards sustainable development, to contribute to their own well-being and that of communities in achieving their social mission, in line with the *mission-governance-accountability* paradigm characterizing these organizations (Matacena, 2012).



**Fig. 2 – Management control and reporting for SD**

In this regard, the use of integrated management accounting tools to provide both financial and non-financial may support TSEs' decision-making around SD, that in turns, can positively affect TSEs' ability to enhance the relationship with stakeholders from which their legitimacy and survival depends on. However, the use of such tools must be strongly supported by internal competences and organizational structures, that are often lacking in TSEs. Given that these organizations often rely on social capital as one of the main elements that influence their legitimacy and survival, they could activate the network of stakeholders' partnerships to acquire the managerial skills necessary for organizational development (Cavicchi & Vagnoni, 2022; Ricciuti and Calò, 2018). To what extent TSEs' partnering activities can contribute to the development of these skills represents however, a topic that needs further investigation (Cavicchi, 2023). Limitations of the study rely on the limited number of respondents and on the sampling technique which has been adopted, as both impeded greater generalizations. Extending the research to the overall population of TSEs once the National Register of Third Sector Entities (RUTNS) will be completed is recommended to develop a more fine-grained analysis of sustainability management control and reporting practices in these organizations. From one

side, sustainability reporting can contribute to making clear the contribution of the single organization to the creation of well-being for stakeholders, in line with its institutional purposes; from the other, it can support competitiveness of TSEs (Gazzola *et al.*, 2017) which is also important to attract funds and allow their financial solidity. In this regard, it is desirable that this tool is adopted by TSEs beyond the actual legal obligations that still confine social reporting to a small spectrum of non-profit organizations.

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