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*Special Issue: Growth of agroholdings and mega-farms in transition and emerging market economies: institutional and organizational aspects*

## **Institutions and individual values motivating corporate social responsibility activities in large farms and agroholdings**

### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Anna Hajdu<sup>Ⓐ</sup>, Marcos F. Daziano<sup>Ⓑ</sup> and Oane Visser<sup>Ⓒ</sup>

<sup>Ⓐ</sup>PhD Candidate, Department Structural Change, Leibniz-Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO), Theodor-Lieser-Str. 2, 06120, Halle (Saale), Germany

<sup>Ⓑ</sup>Researcher and Consultant, Department of Institutions, Organizations and Strategy, Food and Agribusiness Program, Agronomy School (FAUBA), University of Buenos Aires, Av. San Martín 4453, C1417 DSE, Buenos Aires, Argentina

<sup>Ⓒ</sup>Associate Professor, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS), Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, the Netherlands

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### **Abstract**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities have been shown to derive from external and internal motivations of a company. Little attention has been given to motivations of managers in large farms and agroholdings to undertake CSR activities thanks to individual values and pressure from institutions. We therefore investigate the types of CSR activities conducted by 18 managers in large farms and agroholdings in Argentina. We underline their perception of social issues and their motivations to do CSR activities. The framework developed in this paper shows that given the lack of pressure from national-level formal and other informal institutions, individual values (informal institutions) and international institutions (certification schemes-formal institutions) carry more weight in managers' decision to do CSR activities. While some of these motivations have an instrumental background, they overlap with normative motivations that underlie the business activity.

**Keywords:** Argentina, large-scale farms, social issues, grounded theory, large-scale land acquisitions  
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ⒶCorresponding author: [hajdu@iamo.de](mailto:hajdu@iamo.de)

## 1. Introduction

The agricultural sector has been under increased societal scrutiny for a number of social and environmental ills. Agriculture has contributed not only to a rapid increase in food production (De Olde and Valentinov, 2019) but also to mounting concerns over animal welfare, genetic engineering, industrialization and extinction of family farms (Balmann *et al.*, 2016; Gagalyuk *et al.*, 2018), with growing societal (and state) pressure to address these concerns (Barham, 1997; Blandford and Fulponi, 1999; Van der Ploeg, 2020). A majority of studies have pointed to scores of social issues (Balmann *et al.*, 2013; Clapp, 2017; Hermans *et al.*, 2017; Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck, 2010; Lambin and Meyfroidt, 2011; Lapa *et al.*, 2015; Messerli *et al.*, 2015) and partly also identified the types of social issues these farms seek to address or not (Gagalyuk *et al.*, 2018; Grouiez, 2014; Visser *et al.*, 2019).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been one of the tools employed by the private sector to respond to societal pressure to address social issues. In agribusiness research, CSR has been more widely discussed in relation to the food industry (Dennis *et al.*, 1998; Hartmann, 2011; Ness, 1992). Studies on CSR in agriculture were virtually absent, but have become somewhat more frequent over the past years (Heyder and Theuvsen, 2008, 2009, 2012; Luhmann and Theuvsen, 2016). Those studies that have focused on agricultural corporations operating large farms have underlined their social function (Gagalyuk *et al.*, 2018; Grouiez, 2014; Mamonova, 2018; Visser *et al.*, 2019). A few studies discuss agricultural managers' perceptions of social issues and/or their motivation to address them through CSR (Gagalyuk *et al.*, 2018; Heyder and Theuvsen, 2012; Ortega *et al.*, 2016). Visser *et al.* (2019) found in one of the studied Russian regions that large farms apply CSR for the purpose of image management rather than a proactive commitment. Therefore, the CSR applied by these farms does not address the actual social issues villagers experience due to the actions of large farms. Given the rapid proliferation of large-scale organizational forms of agricultural production and associated scrutiny of the agricultural sector, a majority of work focuses on the social issues. However, it is counterintuitive that only a few studies address how managers in the farming companies perceive social issues and why they are motivated to address certain social issues.

Motivations for CSR activities have often been associated with reasons that are external to an organization (e.g. stakeholder theory, legitimation theory). Often companies' instrumental motivation is highlighted as the main motivation behind CSR (following instrumental CSR theories). Furthermore, Amaeshi *et al.* (2016) underlined that the motivation for CSR activities can be present in the case of institutional voids especially in developing countries; and Gagalyuk *et al.* (2018) argued that farms aim at filling these voids. From a neo-institutional theory perspective, motivations for CSR activities derive from external reasons (e.g. pressure of formal and informal institutions) as well as internal reasons (pressure at the organizational or individual level). According to new institutional economics, formal and informal institutions are the 'rules of the game in a society, or... the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction' (North, 1990: 3). While written laws establish the formal framework, social values (a society's values) are the result of both its formal and informal institutions (Kingston and Caballero, 2009). Individual values are according to some authors (Aparicio *et al.* 2018; Schnebel, 2000; Tabellini, 2008, 2010), a subset or feature of informal institutions.

This paper investigates how managers in large farms and agroholdings perceive and act to address social issues. In particular, our research questions aim to identify the type of social responsibility activities these undertake and the main social issues the managers perceive as salient and may address through CSR activities. A third research question inquires into the managers' motivation to do these activities from an institutional theory perspective.

Our focus is on managers in agricultural companies active in two regions in Argentina producing cash crops such as wheat, corn, sunflower and soy, with additional insights from the citrus sector. Interviews with managers in these types of companies analyzed with thematic analysis and grounded theory, help to shape a broader understanding of formal and informal institutions that underlie CSR activities. Cotton, coffee, timber,

cocoa, fruits have been crops that attracted mounting scholarly investigation, as these products have been inserted into value chains with fair trade and other social certification schemes; but less so the production of cash crops such as wheat, corn, soybean and oilseeds.

CSR activities in Argentina have historical roots dating back to at least colonial times, particularly when it comes to the philanthropic elements regarding social issues (Milberg *et al.*, 2001; Newell and Muro, 2006). Globalization appears to be a crucial determinant of CSR responsibility strategies, as many sectors, e.g. the citrus industry in Argentina, are strongly influenced by international standards (Newell and Muro, 2006). Newell and Muro (2006) go as far as to argue that the embeddedness within global markets emerges as perhaps the single most important driver for CSR behavior. To our knowledge, no research has focused so far on the CSR activities of large farms and agrohholdings in Argentina and how they address social issues.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section explains the theoretical framework and elaborates on how we define CSR for this purpose. The third section discusses the empirical context. The fourth section focuses on the methods and methodology used, while the fifth section provides the results and a discussion conceptualizing the nature of company managers' motivations for conducting CSR activities. A final section concludes the paper and discusses its limitations and future research directions.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Before proceeding to discuss definitions of CSR and the institutional and individual levels motivating it, first we highlight the global, historical changes that spurred the rise of CSR. According to Dolan and Rajak (2011) CSR has emerged, as a result of the downsizing of the state in the past decades as well as a shift of power to the management of corporations due to separation of ownership from control (Berle and Means, 1932). Structural adjustment policies, and neo-liberal reforms more broadly, have led to the privatization of state functions, reduced taxing of the private sector (contributing to reduced state budgets), leaving voids that CSR partly tries to address (Dolan and Rajak, 2011; for Argentina see Newell and Muro, 2006). There are various caveats related to a broad shift of social functions from the state to the private sector, which might undermine the democratic, universal and inclusive aspects of welfare (Blowfield, 2007; Visser *et al.*, 2019). Rather than seeing CSR as a substitute for state welfare, or a new era of corporate citizenship (Zadek, 2001), we only study the local role of CSR and where it might complement limited voids left by the wider welfare state.

CSR is a complex construct that has emerged along a variety of conceptual framings and definitions (see instrumental, political, integrative and ethical theories, in Blasco and Zølner, 2010; Garriga and Melé, 2004; Secchi, 2007) but arguing for one or the other definition is not within the scope of this paper. It has also been tied into a duality of either/or economic maximization versus benevolent practices (Amaeshi and Adi, 2007). Our study argues both from a business case and a normative case perspective for CSR (Branco and Rodrigues, 2006). A variety of definitions of CSR have been put forward (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Carroll, 2016; Dahlsrud, 2008; Maignan and Ralston, 2002; Michael, 2003; Rahman, 2011). Useful for the purposes of this article is the definition given by Wood and Logsdon (2002) that CSR is about the contribution that the corporation provides for solving social issues.

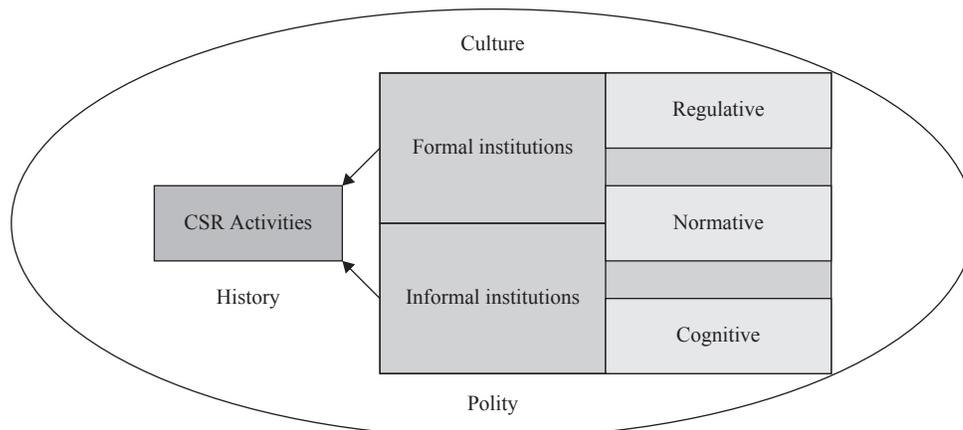
Different reasons for the adoption of CSR activities have been analyzed. The institutional approach argues that managers face pressure from different institutions in society. Scott (1995) categorizes regulative, normative and cognitive institutions that exist in a company's environment and constrain or enable its strategic decisions (Aguilera and Jackson, 2003; Campbell, 2007). Shnayder *et al.* (2016) provide a forthright description of each of the three pillars. The regulative pillar comprises institutions that exercise their pressure over companies through laws, and other compulsory regulations. Governments, as a type of formal institution, impact CSR practices by seeking compliance with regulations and penalizing non-compliance. The normative pillar consists of institutions that encourage companies to behave morally or ethically, usually in compliance with industry or other external standards. The cognitive pillar encompasses less tangible institutions that

encourage companies' behavior through social mechanisms like social pressure and conformity. These are the least formal institutions. No official rules are established and the consequences for non-compliance are not always clear or understood. Institutions from this pillar can encourage isomorphism between companies – companies copy each other's behavior. As more companies adopt certain behaviors, they become 'normal' or standard, which may encourage the remaining companies to follow suit (Shnayder *et al.*, 2016).

According to Campbell (2004, 2007), Doh and Guay (2006) and Hiss (2009) institutional settings are shaped by institutional legacies that reflect the culture, history and polity of a particular country or region. Neo-institutionalists also differentiate between formal and informal institutions (Campbell, 2004, 2007; Doh and Guay, 2006; Hiss, 2009; Keim, 2003). Written norms, rules, laws, regulations and directives, property rights are 'formal' institutions while habits, cultural traits, customs, religions, languages and values are 'informal' institutions (Doh and Guay, 2006; Zucker, 1987). This theoretical framework is conceptualized in Figure 1.

Research on determinants of CSR explored the effects of external normative values (e.g. the ethical concerns of particular stakeholder groups or of the formal institutional environment) on CSR. Scholars have argued for an interaction between individual, organizational and institutional motivations for CSR (Filatotchev and Nakajima, 2014), individual and organizational representing internal motivations and institutional representing external motivations for CSR. Studies on the interplay between organizational (e.g. corporate culture) and institutional motivations for CSR activities are more prevalent. Fewer studies have examined the effects of internal values at the organizational or individual levels (e.g. the ethical concerns, the political ideology of top management, etc.) on CSR (Petrenko *et al.*, 2016). In the management literature individual/managerial values are among the primary determinants of CSR (Neubert *et al.*, 2009; Schminke *et al.*, 2005). Yet empirical evidence and theoretical elaboration on managers' motivations for conducting CSR at the individual level have been scarce (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Yin *et al.*, 2016). Authors have also shown that instrumental motivation is not the only driver for CSR but could be associated with managers' values that indicate a normative motivation (Hemingway, 2005; Hemingway and Maclagan, 2004; Yin *et al.*, 2016).

In relation to agroholdings as an object of our analysis, several studies have shown that companies may adopt an instrumental approach while fulfilling at the same time social functions. Gagalyuk *et al.* (2018) based on case studies of four agroholdings involving interviews with 11 managers of these, identified that Ukrainian agroholdings adopt an instrumental approach to CSR but fulfill at the same time social functions. Similarly, Grouiez (2014) found in the Orel Oblast of Russia that social policies of farms could not be separated from



**Figure 1.** Institution categories (formal and informal OR regulative, normative and cognitive) that influence managers' inclination towards practicing corporate social responsibility activities under existing institutional legacies (culture, history and polity). Devised by authors according to Scott (1995), Keim (2003), Campbell (2004, 2007), Doh and Guay (2006), Hiss (2009), Shnayder *et al.* (2016).

their economic development strategies. Our approach may provide additional insights into how institutions and individual values motivate managers' behavior to conduct CSR activities or not. We have not identified further studies specifically focusing on the motivation for CSR in farming companies.

### 3. Empirical context

Argentina has not been devoid of pressing ongoing social issues, such as high unemployment rates and recurrent economic crises with increases in poverty levels (Cooney, 2007; Stiglitz, 2002). Corruption, inefficient public health infrastructure, lack of proper sanitation in rural and urban areas and growing poverty rates and inequality are the most urgent social issues the country has to tackle currently. A report of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina showed that 40.8% of people are below the poverty line, which manifests in food insecurity, poor environmental quality and deficient access to water, energy, sanitation services and decent housing (CNA, 2019). Rural poverty is a crucial part of the poverty pictures here; however, it is not strictly an agricultural problem (Verner, 2006). Scarce provision of rural public services related to health, education, infrastructure and transfer programs further deepen this picture.

The agricultural sector plays an important role in Argentina's economy being also a key player in global food security (World Bank Group, 2018). In 2019, the share of agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added (% of GDP) was reported at 6.1% (The World Bank, 2020). According to data of the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS-USDA) and Rosario Grain Board (2020, 2021), Argentina is a top 5 producer and exporter of soybeans and its derivatives, corn, sorghum, sunflower and its derivatives, lemons and its derivatives, pears and garlic. In 2020, it was the third largest global producer of soybeans, with 50 million tons (behind Brazil and the USA) and the third exporter of beans but first exporter of soybean oil and meal. With a production of 51 million tons of corn in 2020, the country is the fifth producer globally (after the USA, China, Brazil and the EU) and the third exporter. Argentina also ranks ninth in the world in wheat production with 20 million tons (after the EU, China, India, Russia, USA, Canada, Ukraine and Pakistan) and it is the sixth exporter. It is also the eleventh producer and sixth exporter of barley, and the eighth producer and second exporter of sorghum. Among the provinces in the northern part of the country, Tucumán province has contributed the highest shares in the production of wheat in addition to the province of Santiago del Estero (Table 1).

Argentina is one of the countries that have registered an expansion of agrohholdings and large farms. These farms are active in large-scale land acquisitions and constitute a primary agriculture actor, whether through ownership or leasing of land (or a combination of both). Agrohholdings are very large farms that are organized over a few hundreds to tens of thousands of hectares, under a variety of organizational and legal forms, and names (Hermans *et al.*, 2017). They have been defined as an agricultural organization whose shares are owned by a holding company that acts as an umbrella for a number of horizontally and vertically integrated units in the agri-food chain (Visser *et al.*, 2012). In the case of Argentina they are not only horizontally and integrated units but they can also include vertical and horizontal coordination (Senesi *et al.*, 2017). These farm structures are network-based rather than connected through ownership via equity or shares.

The Pampas and the Northwestern part of Argentina are the main cereal and oilseeds producing regions. Historically, crops rotated with permanent pastures that could restore soil structure and fertility covered the Pampas (Lence, 2010). Switching to continuous cropping changed these cycles, while double cropping (mainly wheat and soybeans) has become a very popular choice for agricultural producers in the Pampas (Bert *et al.*, 2011; Lence, 2010; Medan *et al.*, 2011). Especially from the 1980s onwards with the adoption of no-tillage techniques and genetically modified crops, agriculture intensified and led to the replacement of mixed cattle grazing-cropping systems to continuous cropping and increases of field sizes (Gras, 2009; Medan *et al.*, 2011). Tucumán province in the Northwest is home to sugarcane producers and in the second half of the nineteenth century its main activities focused on alcohol production from sugarcane, tobacco and leather crafts (Bravo, 2008). Wheat cultivation registered notable increases in the 1950s and Tucumán province became one of the provinces with the largest wheat-producing surfaces after Santiago del Estero among those in the Northwest.

**Table 1.** Argentina crop production TOP6 extensive crops – 2019/2020 harvest (Ministry of Agriculture and Rosario Grain Board, 2020).

<b>Crop area (in hectares)</b>												
Province	Wheat	Barley	Corn	Sorghum	Soybean	Sunflower	Total	Share/ total	Winter cereals	Summer cereals	Oilseeds	Total
Buenos Aires	2,304,200	855,682	2,308,200	238,138	6,180,061	875,043	12,761,323	34%	3,159,882	2,546,338	7,055,104	12,761,323
Cordoba	1,530,050	53,325	2,614,910	121,688	4,971,202	18,599	9,309,774	25%	1,583,375	2,736,598	4,989,801	9,309,774
Entre Rios	365,800	4,120	382,500	151,750	1,426,400	4,547	2,335,117	6%	369,920	534,250	1,430,947	2,335,117
La Pampa	371,900	60,785	479,000	39,875	516,000	213,786	1,681,347	5%	432,685	518,875	729,786	1,681,347
Santa Fe	903,900	28,234	890,800	141,288	3,057,363	206,234	5,227,818	14%	932,134	1,032,088	3,263,597	5,227,818
San Luis	24,200	–	377,800	17,125	327,340	8,509	754,974	2%	24,200	394,925	335,849	754,974
Central Argentina	5,500,050	1,002,147	7,053,210	709,863	16,478,366	1,326,717	32,070,353	86%	6,502,197	7,763,073	17,805,083	32,070,353
Catamarca	34,700	–	9,300	375	29,900	–	74,275	0%	34,700	9,675	29,900	74,275
Chaco	115,800	–	325,500	51,613	511,068	495,243	1,499,223	4%	115,800	377,113	1,006,311	1,499,223
Corrientes	–	–	14,000	5,000	20,000	–	39,000	0%	–	19,000	20,000	39,000
Formosa	–	–	40,000	28,750	18,500	6,546	93,796	0%	–	68,750	25,046	93,796
Jujuy	3,265	–	5,244	–	7,238	–	15,747	0%	3,265	5,244	7,238	15,747
Misiones	–	–	22,200	–	1,850	–	24,050	0%	–	22,200	1,850	24,050
Salta	75,900	–	262,150	–	493,800	–	831,850	2%	75,900	262,150	493,800	831,850
Santiago del Estero	288,900	6,351	684,500	109,500	971,840	46,121	2,107,212	6%	295,251	794,000	1,017,961	2,107,212
Tucuman	145,400	947	65,750	5,250	203,900	–	421,247	1%	146,347	71,000	203,900	421,247
Northern Argentina	663,965	7,298	1,428,644	200,488	2,258,096	547,909	5,106,399	14%	671,263	1,629,132	2,806,005	5,106,399
Country total	6,164,015	1,009,444	8,481,854	910,350	18,736,462	1,874,626	37,176,751	100%	7,173,459	9,392,204	20,611,088	37,176,751
<b>Production (in metric tons)</b>												
Buenos Aires	11,305,002	3,781,477	12,955,509	714,945	18,542,729	2,050,108	49,349,770	34%	15,086,479	13,670,454	20,592,837	49,349,770
Cordoba	7,312,869	120,958	16,170,280	546,339	16,704,156	49,759	40,904,361	28%	7,433,827	16,716,619	16,753,915	40,904,361
Entre Rios	1,680,170	17,232	2,298,225	743,617	3,948,452	10,256	8,697,953	6%	1,697,403	3,041,842	3,958,708	8,697,953
La Pampa	1,454,897	205,157	1,096,620	108,096	1,356,692	486,477	4,707,938	3%	1,660,054	1,204,716	1,843,169	4,707,938
Santa Fe	4,360,239	98,176	5,802,581	475,662	10,413,337	376,521	21,526,516	15%	4,458,415	6,278,243	10,789,858	21,526,516
San Luis	84,110	–	2,500,970	39,962	893,314	20,135	3,538,490	2%	84,110	2,540,932	913,449	3,538,490
Central Argentina	26,197,287	4,223,000	40,824,185	2,628,621	51,858,681	2,993,255	128,725,029	88%	30,420,287	43,452,806	54,851,936	128,725,029
Catamarca	55,881	–	50,050	1,119	78,111	–	185,161	0%	55,881	51,169	78,111	185,161
Chaco	163,670	–	1,999,884	218,572	1,509,004	773,233	4,664,363	3%	163,670	2,218,456	2,282,237	4,664,363
Corrientes	–	–	34,020	9,990	42,668	–	86,678	0%	–	44,010	42,668	86,678
Formosa	–	–	153,000	87,915	48,134	12,724	301,773	0%	–	240,915	60,858	301,773
Jujuy	10,166	–	15,012	–	12,819	–	37,998	0%	10,166	15,012	12,819	37,998
Misiones	–	–	64,293	–	4,933	–	69,226	0%	–	64,293	4,933	69,226
Salta	133,565	–	1,521,555	–	1,188,651	–	2,843,771	2%	133,565	1,521,555	1,188,651	2,843,771
Santiago del Estero	816,269	–	4,483,905	405,596	3,370,597	77,788	9,154,155	6%	816,269	4,889,501	3,448,385	9,154,155
Tucuman	173,162	–	329,991	14,186	524,144	–	1,041,483	1%	173,162	344,177	524,144	1,041,483
Northern Argentina	1,352,713	–	8,651,710	737,379	6,779,062	863,745	18,384,609	12%	1,352,713	9,389,089	7,642,806	18,384,609
Country total	27,550,000	4,223,000	49,475,895	3,366,000	58,637,742	3,857,000	147,109,637	100%	31,773,000	52,841,895	62,494,742	147,109,637

This expansion has registered increases, stagnations and decreases over the past thirty years due to a number of institutional changes (Senesi *et al.*, 2017). The country has gone through periods in which its economy has been liberalized and then recontrolled intermittently. Despite this, increasing connections to global agricultural markets have favored agricultural modernization and intensification. Geographically, Argentina has vast areas of scarcely populated land and is characterized by insecure property rights and weak institutions (Bidaseca and Visser, 2010). The development of agriculture via expanding land areas has been associated with conflicts over land (Vom Hau and Wilde, 2010) in provinces such as Santiago del Estero (Bidaseca and Visser, 2010), demise of family farms, restructuring of social relations and expansion of monocultures<sup>1</sup> (especially soy) in the Pampas and other regions, which according to Pengue (2005) and Gras (2009) place food sovereignty<sup>2</sup> and food self-sufficiency<sup>3</sup> in jeopardy (Gras, 2009; Pengue, 2005). Displacement of small-scale producers (Urcola *et al.*, 2013), deforestation and biodiversity depletion due to agricultural intensification in the Gran Chaco region (Mastrangelo, 2014; Zak *et al.*, 2004), habitat destruction due to deforestation, depletion of soil nutrient stocks and biomass in the Pampas (Viglizzo *et al.*, 2011) are additional problems raised.

CSR in the agricultural sector in Argentina has been widely driven by North American and European certification standards (Newell and Muro, 2006). The authors underline that the approach to CSR activities is rather passive and concentrated in its ‘soft, voluntary and philanthropic phase, receiving proposals from NGOs, employees or neighboring communities and then offering the time of their employees, money or goods to successful applicants (Haslam, 2004; Newell and Muro, 2006). Our analysis in Argentina contributes to this literature.

#### 4. Research design and methods

This study is an exploratory qualitative study that combines qualitative thematic analysis with theoretical development. To address the first two research questions on the types of CSR activities undertaken by large farms and agroholdings and how they perceive social issues we use thematic analysis. Perception precedes behavior (Yin *et al.*, 2016) and this is why we also focus on managers’ perception of social issues. To address the third question on the motivation to conduct these types of activities, we apply grounded theory according to Corbin and Strauss (2015). The first two research questions complement the core purpose of the paper to ground the analysis in the perspectives of key informants and how they give meaning and conceptualize their motivation around undertaking CSR activities. Building on the work of Nielsen and D’haen (2014) who pointed to the widely missing methodological information of qualitative research, we give a more detailed overview of our methodology.

We conducted in-depth and semi-structured interviews with key informants from large farming organizations. Our definition of ‘large’ is broad and refers to the amount of hectares the companies operate themselves or through contractors, either by owning or leasing land. Therefore, all farms over 1000 ha are considered large for the purpose of this paper. Preliminary in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted during 10 days in June 2018 in Buenos Aires have guided our understanding of the activity of the companies and the types of CSR activities conducted by these. The purpose of these interviews was to inform the choice of the methodology. Contacts to the companies approached during this period were provided through partners of the Lascala Project at the University of Buenos Aires (FAUBA). An element of judgment approach (Marshall, 1996) is present since we made efforts to contact exclusively large farms and agroholdings and participants coming from a range of managerial and organizational backgrounds. Ten companies accepted our request for an in-depth interview.

<sup>1</sup> Monoculture as defined by Pengue (2005), but actually duoculture, as soy is rotated most commonly with wheat in Argentina

<sup>2</sup> Food sovereignty is defined as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (La Via Campesina, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Food self-sufficiency is defined as a country producing a proportion of its own food needs that approaches or exceeds 100% of its food consumption (FAO, 2016)

In the course of a second stage of data collection we conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews during 5-31 August 2019. Three more interviews were conducted remotely with companies that were not available during this period. We used a mix of convenience, judgment and snowball sampling (Marshall, 1996). We approached the same participants that had been contacted during the first field trip and five of them accepted to give a second interview. The main author identified and contacted additional participants directly by consultation of various online sources and through recommendations from various international and domestic researchers and researchers at an environmental research institute in Argentina (judgment sample). Interview participants recommended us additional interviewees (snowball sample). All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded with ATLAS.ti 8 (ATLAS.ti, Berlin, Germany). In total, 18 managers from 17 companies were interviewed. 12 of 18 managers interviewed represented family-owned companies. In addition to these, among the companies we had contacted initially, one company refused to contribute to the research, ten companies did not reply at all, four companies did not follow up and two companies had ceased their activity. Table 2 provides an overview of the types of interviewed companies.

The questions asked in the semi-structured interviews aimed at: (a) identifying the type of CSR activities conducted; (b) the motivation to undertake these activities; (c) the problems faced as a large farm and opinion on how the agricultural sector is perceived; (d) the main social issues in Argentina's rural areas. A list of questions prepared before the fieldwork assisted the interviews (see list of interview questions in the Supplementary Material). We did not indicate to the interviewees how we define CSR but let them inform us what they understand under CSR.

We conducted the interviews in two regions in Argentina. One is the Pampas region, where we interviewed companies in Buenos Aires that are active in one or more provinces in this region (Cordoba, Santa Fe, Entre Rios). A second region is the Northwestern part of Argentina, the province of Tucumán. In the city of San Miguel de Tucumán we conducted interviews with companies splitting their activity between Tucumán province and at least one additional province in the Northwestern region (e.g. Salta, Santiago del Estero, Catamarca, Jujuy). Wax (1971) urges to select respondents as broadly as possible. Since most of the studies on agroholdings are focused on cereal and oilseed production, our selection criteria for companies was

**Table 2.** Number of hectares operated and type of company.

Company	Operated ha land <sup>1</sup>	Agroholding	Domestic (D) / International (I)	Family-owned
1	28,000	x	I	x
2	60,000	x	D	x
3	4,000	no	D	x
4	50,000	x	D	
5	over 7,000	x	D	
6	7,200	no	D	
7	30,000	x	I	x
8	over 20,000	no	D	x
9	200,000	x	I	
10	na	no	D	x
11	over 20,000	no	D	
12	6,000	no	D	x
13	over 20,000	x	D	x
14	188,000	x	I	x
15	20,000	no	D	x
16	3,000	no	D	x
17	over 5,000	no	D	x

<sup>1</sup> na = not available.

motivated by these large farms and agrohholdings producing wheat, corn, sunflower and/or soybean. To give depth to the sampling we also interviewed managers in agrohholdings that in addition to cash crop production are active in citrus and sugarcane production, two activities that are specific to the Northwestern region. Therefore, we ensured heterogeneity of key informants by geographic and crop diversification and diversification among company managers. We aimed at conducting the interviews with the company owner or CEO. In the cases where this was not possible we conducted the interviews with sustainability/corporate social responsibility managers, farm managers, chief financial officers or chief operations officers. This diversified composition of interviewees helped to capture differences in perceptions and interpretations of CSR activities, social issues and motivations.

## 5. Results and discussion

The research questions of this study are about the perceptions of managers in large farms and agrohholdings on the types of social issues present in rural areas in Argentina, the types of CSR activities they conduct to address certain social issues and their motivations to do so.

We find that most companies have an active approach to CSR activities, taking responsibility for certain CSR activities despite lack of public pressure to do so. Some managers have a motivational basis for CSR activities that is normative and that complements an instrumental interest for the success of the company. Instrumental motivations would be those that are intended to benefit the existence of the company and further their economic success in the long run. Normative motivations suggest those behaviors that managers chose because they believe it is morally correct to do so. In the results section we first present managers' perceptions on social issues in Argentina's rural areas. Secondly, we discuss the types of CSR activities conducted. Finally, we explain the motivations for CSR activities along the institutions that managers identify to be or not to be present to motivate CSR activities. We identify a lack of national-level institutional pressure, lack of sectoral institutional pressure, pressure from international institutions (certification schemes) and presence of expectations from local educational and health organizations. Among family-owned companies we also identify three main individual values company managers highlight to motivate their activities: identification, benevolence, and obligation. These individual values unfold along the dimensions of available time and knowledge (core competence).

### 5.1 Managers' perceptions of social issues

#### ■ Normative and instrumental approach to social issues

Poverty and education are two main social concerns in Argentina, in urban as well as in rural areas. Problems such as land grabbing, displacements from land or conflict over land between small and large farms, demise of family farms (issues that the literature has increasingly pointed to) are not problems the company managers confront. It is rather social issues that they perceive to affect the long-term business activity and existence of their company, such as poverty and associated lack of education and skills of community members. Managers consider communities' and employees' wellbeing a main focal point, as one of them argues: 'You cannot be well if the people around you are not well.' (Interview 7 August 2019). Interviewees recognize that if their employees and the communities they are active in are not well off, they themselves will not be in the future. Employees are considered crucial stakeholders of the companies, while the communities the companies are active in will provide them with the future needed labor force. In this sense, the CSR activities the companies undertake to support peoples' development through educational and health programs is instrumental, as the purpose is to maintain and/or enhance the wellbeing of the own company in the future. However, in several cases it overlaps with a normative motivation: 'My motivation is to improve the living conditions of the people who live here... and if I need a technician – to not have to look for him in another city.' (Interview 5 August 2019).

Much of the CSR literature has treated CSR as a dichotomy between an economic and an ethical purpose (Garriga and Melé, 2004). From the interview responses however, instrumental and normative (ethical) considerations are not mutually exclusive. This is in line with Jones and Wicks (1999) who have also argued that CSR can have both a normative and an instrumental dimension. Graafland and Mazereeuw-Van der Dijn Schouten (2012) contend that in the case of managers who are motivated to do CSR by intrinsic/normative (e.g. ethical or altruistic) motives, policymakers should be careful with providing incentives, because extrinsic (instrumental) motives may crowd out intrinsic (normative) motives (Frey and Jegen, 2001).

Another manager states that it is not easy to separate financial from social performance because in most of the situations at the operational level the economic and social or environmental aspects of a decision are highly interlinked:

A basic example – no-till is a business decision, but it is a sustainable policy as well, because you have benefits [...] with the money, and [...] with enhancing the environment. So there are many, many situations like that [...] where you take the decision for business performance but it also has a positive impact on the environment or social aspect. (Interview 15 August 2019)

This example further supports the argument that normative and instrumental motivations cannot be easily separated.

Among our interviewees we have not identified a company with an exclusively economic focus as an underlying motivation to its CSR activity. Thus, managers did not state that CSR activities with a social focus are conducted to derive financial benefits but two companies underlined that they need to be economically viable to be able to undertake CSR activities: ‘To be a sustainable company [...] for the long term [...] the economic pillar is the first most important to us [...] we need some return, because if not, we have to close down the operations.’ (Interview 15 August 2019). Not having returns would signify for the company to not be able to further contribute to social and environmental dimensions of CSR.

There is no consensus among the interviewees about whether the companies need to be economically profitable in order to conduct social responsibility activities. One manager mentions:

No, I would not be able to tell (if there is a financial benefit) [...] There is a direct donation with an approved budget, and that is not directly related to business profits, the budget is available regardless of the company’s economic balance. (Interview conducted 22 August 2019)

This company may be more intrinsically motivated, as it continues doing philanthropic activities even if it does not have a profit. At the same time this can point to the reduced amount of resources the company allocates, so that independent of circumstances these resources can still be allocated. Companies generally agree that the amount of financial resources they allocate for CSR activities is small. Another company’s motivation for social contribution appears to be instrumental, as the manager underlines:

We are very involved in the local situations of communities [...] they have a lot of underdevelopment [...] they need basic things, like education, nutrition, health and so on. [...] And we understand that we need people from those communities, to operate our farms, to operate tractors, etc. We need those communities to be healthier than they are today, so, it’s a win-win situation. If we help them, they will help us by providing better and more skilled workers, and better labor force. (Interview 15 August 2019)

However, the manager states that they consider labor provision for the communities an important contribution on the social side as they have generated a large number of jobs:

On the social side [...] we believe that [...] the most important thing that we do for society or the communities, is providing labor for the communities, because we started from zero and today we are almost nine thousand people. (Interview 15 August 2019)

In relation to labor the manager also underlines that in comparison to other companies they:

pay all the taxes, pay all the social services and benefits for the workers, which is something not very common in Argentina. Here 40% of the economy is ‘under the desk’; no taxes, no security services, nothing, so we believe that one of our most important impacts on the communities is offering these jobs [...] That is a huge impact on the rural areas of Argentina. (Interview 15 August 2019)

Thus the main social issues the companies perceive to be salient in rural areas in Argentina are poverty and education. The way they contribute to addressing these issues is firstly through job creation. In an institutional context, where formal institutions such as laws and regulation enforcement lack (as 40% of the economy runs illegally according to the interviewee) these companies regard their contribution to social issues by complying with tax and labor laws and additionally developing educational and health projects with other organizations and educational institutions. Kuznetsov *et al.* (2009) found similar results in Russia. Russian managers from different industries included activities like tax payment, employment creation and abiding by the law into CSR activities. This view of CSR compared to countries where the rule of law and other formal and informal institutions are in place is, according to the authors, reflective of the country’s weak institutional environment, ‘in which laws are abused, rules are either feeble or not enforced, and institutions are incomplete, tendentious and corrupt’ (Kuznetsov *et al.*, 2009).

### 5.2 Types of corporate social responsibility activities

The companies interviewed conduct workplace and community CSR both out of normative and instrumental motivation. The CSR activities range from a mix of basic charitable giving in the form of product and money donations for educational and health purposes to targeted programs devised by the company or together with schools and health organizations for addressing specific issues (e. g. substance abuse, child labor, sexual education, women’s employment opportunities, first aid and fire prevention courses, environmental education activities). Even though we have specifically inquired the companies about CSR activities with a social goal, some companies underlined conservation and biodiversity monitoring activities. The companies imply a positive social effect of these environmental activities in the long term.

All the 18 managers interviewed undertake some form of philanthropic activities, except one (two managers come from the same company in different regions, this is why Table 2 shows 17 companies). On a first level of engagement, some managers resume to ad hoc donation of goods or money to charity or assistance of employees with educational or health matters, a type of CSR Newell and Muro (2006) framed as ‘rather passive and concentrated in its ‘soft, voluntary and philanthropic phase’. On a second level companies channel their philanthropic activity in a more coordinated way by collaboration on health and educational projects with NGOs. A third level of engagement is that of devising own projects and goals through a company NGO and establishing partnerships with other private sector organizations, NGOs and educational institutions. Another level would comprise companies that also collaborate with research institutes to address environmental problems that may have social consequences (e.g. monitoring of bees for cross-contamination with pesticides, wildlife monitoring). A number of companies in the Tucumán region have established collaboration with a consultancy comprised of social experts. The programs devised by these companies specifically address social matters of their employees and are aimed at improving their living conditions (e.g. remediation and enhancement of housing conditions). The collaborations with educational institutions such as research institutes derive from the public-private partnerships that have been promoted since the late 1990s in Argentina (Arza and López, 2011). One agroholding that also operates among the largest number of hectares in our sample is a company that has established an NGO as an independent activity of the company.

Among other activities, this NGO supports other multinational companies that invest in Argentina with addressing community development projects.

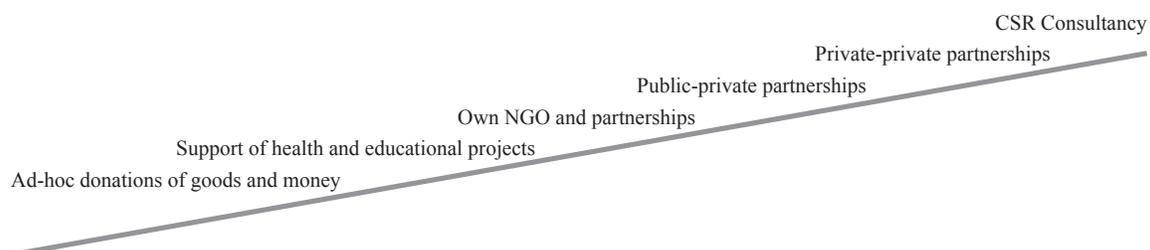
The categorization (depicted in Figure 2) enables an overview of the variety of engagements companies choose but does not signify that one company exclusively chooses to engage at one level. The categorization also does not imply a ranking, although we identify that ad-hoc donations require less time and labor resources compared to projects where more private sector, public and civil society organizations are involved.

A combination of several engagements depicted in Figure 2 may be possible. Table S1 of the Supplementary Material gives a broader overview of the types of CSR activities conducted by the interviewed managers in the companies. The different levels of CSR activities are such that no company resembles the other one in the number of CSR activities engaged in. We can classify the companies along a spectrum of passive to proactive behavior. This spectrum implies the topics they address; the amount of personnel they dedicate to these activities; whether they coordinate the activities themselves through an own NGO; whether they collaborate with organizations such as specialized NGOs on the different topics; whether they also engage with organizations such as consultancies or research organizations and a mix of these. This spectrum can give an overview of the variety of activities companies choose to engage in, although it is insufficient to inform us in this format on the resources allocated and the depth and actual impact of CSR activities on employees, communities and society overall. We could argue that within the same industry large farms and agroholdings pursue different responsibility business models and that there exist distinct patterns of responsibility embedding (Laasch and Pinkse, 2020).

### 5.3 Motivations for CSR activities

#### ■ Lack of national-level institutional pressure

Institutional theory has largely argued for institutional drivers as a reason for CSR activities. Scholars have shown that companies may develop CSR as a response to wider social and institutional pressures (Aguilera *et al.*, 2007; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). For instance, the state could exert pressure through instruments of public policy or local governmental organizations, legal regulation or other formal institutions according to Crouch (2006). Our thematic analysis, however, shows that managers of large farms and agroholdings do not experience sectoral nor national-level institutional pressures. No coercive political regulation nor formal constraints or normative pressure of professional groups through for example farmers' associations or other independent organizations exist. Most of the companies are part of at least one farmers' organization. Especially in Aapresid (Argentine Association of Direct Sowing Producers – Asociación Argentina de Productores en Siembra Directa) social issues are discussed and awareness about them is raised but the companies unanimously do not perceive pressure to be socially responsible. This situation is further coupled with non-existing activism from consumers and employees and the apparent lack of other formal organizations such as NGOs, who have not been critical of these companies' activity to specifically address a wider array of social issues. Agrarian movements have been active in Argentina for at least two decades and the pressure on



**Figure 2.** Engagement spectrum of large farms and agroholdings and the types of activities and entities they engage with.

the agricultural sector has increased over this period with a strong focus on deforestation, agrichemical use and a reform of the national seed law. However, our interviewees do not point to pressure in these respects. One company underlines that they do not conduct their activity in areas associated with deforestation:

We try not to do deforestation, we are not involved in the huge forests, we don't want to be there, and we don't want to be in the huge wetlands. We don't want to be operating in the most sensitive areas of our planet, that's for sure. There are some situations that are 'in the middle' [...] a lot of parts in Argentina, that have some wet areas or trees and maybe we operate in those areas, always by the law. (Interview 15 August 2019)

On the contrary, we find that formal regulative and informal normative institutions are lacking as a pressure for these large farms and agroholdings to undertake or improve their social responsibility activities. Two company managers mention that they encountered demands by a local neighbor regarding their spraying activity, which they however do not perceive as a critique from society but consider being legitimate demands and are open to address:

From time to time [...] there is something that is quite common in the rural sector, that maybe another farmer, a neighbor says: you sprayed my crop instead of yours, because of the wind. (Interview 15 August 2019)

Thus pressure from villagers does exist but as the interviewee argues it is few and very localized cases, which are addressed by the company:

Sometimes it happens, that is not a big issue; it is something that has a very low frequency. And it is something that every farmer at some point in life will have to go through once. (Interview 15 August 2019)

These types of situations or other low frequency claims regarding noise or dust the company considers to be 'a 'common situation', but not an issue, it's not that society will try to close down our operation.' (Interview 15 August 2019). These problems are not experienced as major problems but as one-off situations that can be addressed right away by the company. This company expressed its interest in communication with affected communities in those situations where demands are posed to them, to be able to identify the source of the problem and the way to tackle it. The solution-orientation of these companies shows that they do not perceive such problems as threats but rather as opportunities to improve their activities. However, scholarly research has shown that those demands have priority in which the stakeholders are perceived as powerful, those who can directly impact the firm (Hart and Sharma, 2004). In case the company does not perceive the stakeholders as powerful they may not consider the issue a priority. This is why authors increasingly underline the importance to address fringe stakeholders – stakeholders who are remote but can exert increasing pressure and question a company's legitimacy to operate (Hart and Sharma, 2004).

Without exception companies mention that they comply with laws. One manager states: 'We, as a company, we do everything on [...] the right side [...] by the law.' (Interview 15 August 2019). Managers regard this compliance as a condition for social responsibility and for engagement in other responsibility levels such as ethical and philanthropic (discretionary according to Carroll, 1991) responsibility. Our interviewees indicate an agreement that with undertaking CSR activities they represent a minority and that a majority of economic entities do not comply with legal regulation regarding labor practices or taxes. Indeed, Ronconi (2010) and Bergman (2010) have shown that in Argentina only half of the workforce receives all the benefits to which they are legally entitled, while tax evasion is 'a well-entrenched phenomenon'. An explanation could be that adhering to laws under conditions where the majority of entities would comply with laws and regulations would not be considered CSR by the interviewees but institutional conformity. However, in a context where the majority of economic actors do not conform and it is not the norm to abide by formal institutions such as laws and regulations because of weak governance and lack of enforcement (Ronconi, 2010), abiding by the

law is considered socially responsible behavior by these managers (much in line with Carroll's definition of CSR). Similar tendencies have been observed for instance in Russia by Crotty (2016) as well as by Gagalyuk *et al.* (2018) in Ukraine. Legal responsibility of companies is about complying with the basic rules that have been set. Independent of their economic performance, the companies indicated that they conduct ethical (e.g. fair working conditions for employees, payment of all contributions, etc.) and philanthropic CSR activities, while abiding by laws and regulations. However, the companies do not experience external institutional pressure (by local administrations, by civil society, etc.) to do so.

■ *Pressure from international institutions (certification schemes)*

Argentina's adherence to the Mercosur regional trading bloc came with increased international investment and demands for compliance with social and environmental standards. From an institutional theory perspective this experience is termed the 'country-of-origin-effect' (Noorderhaven and Harzing, 2003) and especially applies to citrus and soybean production among interviewed companies. The certifications companies need to apply (e.g. UN Global Compact, Round Table for Responsible Soy (RTRS)) reflect the norms and values of Western democracies but have led to changes in institutions in Argentina in these sectors. Muthuri and Gilbert (2011) argue that the changes in institutions in so-called developing countries are wide-ranging due to the 'country-of-origin-effect.' Certifications are a variant of formal institutions that act as a pressure to adapt to normative requirements of Western clients. The countries of origin of these clients are the US or European countries and increasingly Japan and South Korea. By engaging with the global market where the clients of this origin are present, the agricultural producers are aware that informal institutions such as norms in their country may change in the future, too.

In one case, existing certifications drive more responsible behavior in relation to waste disposal and community CSR. One interviewee talks about his habitual way of disposing waste, burning it like everyone else does, instead of taking it to the waste dump. Only when the RTRS certification for soybean imposed to dispose of his waste appropriately he engaged with the destination of his waste:

[...] Historically I did what everyone does, dug a well, put the litter in, burned it and covered it. When I began to certify (with RTRS), they told me that I have to take the garbage to the dump and not burn it. Then I went to the dump, to see it, because it had never happened. I arrive and see that it is an open-air dump, all the garbage scattered there, animals, pigs, and cows eating, so I wondered: What am I doing with my garbage!?!... Many people were going to look for things in the dump; there were people stirring the garbage, but people did not look for food in the garbage, only in Sachayoj; what they were going to look for was bits of cable, to be able to join them and have electricity, and they make an illegal connection to the electric network, and that way, three times everything was set on fire. So, those types of situations that you see make you aware of the things that are important to see from the social point of view, in which one hopes to contribute. (Interview 5 August 2019)

The RTRS certification scheme requirements motivated the manager to check the conditions for his waste disposal. He thereby identified the lack of state involvement in securing an electricity infrastructure in rural areas and saw what the lack of regulation enforcement for waste disposal (that he had benefited from like everyone else) looks like. Poverty is directly associated with the lack of these means that cause problems, such as fires, in rural communities. Therefore, the manager hopes to contribute to these communities by having organized a fire prevention and first aid course for the community. Scholars would argue that hereby the manager only addresses the effects and not the cause of the problem while maintaining a status quo (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2017). However, the manager points to the structural national institutional deficiencies – institutions that did not pose a pressure on the company owner to dispose the waste at the waste dump and do not ensure electricity for the communities. The company manager recognizes that he has been part of this system for a long time until new institutions and norms (certifications from Western countries) required him to change his behavior. Structurally he will still be part of the problem, as long as the Argentine state cannot devise mechanisms for companies to dispose of their waste in an environmentally and socially

friendly way. Even though his behavior has changed, now that he feels pressure from a normative point of view, his individual efforts can only have a minor impact, as other companies who do not have the pressure of international certifications or domestic institutions will keep to their old habits.

From a theoretical perspective, the manager's response to the waste issue before the RTRS certification and after the decision for RTRS certification can be interpreted as his company inhabiting different institutional spaces. His decision to address waste management issues without being pressured by local institutions to do so, points to what Laasch and Pinkse (2020) argue as motivations not being defined by the institutions within the national boundaries but by stakeholders dominating another institutional space, in this case that of RTRS certification within which the company is now active. The location of a company inside or outside of a space's boundaries distinguishes the type of institutional complexity it responds to leading to distinct responses.

At the same time the manager underlines that he cannot address the cause of the waste disposal problem by himself, without the support of the state. The manager identifies that addressing poverty or educational issues is a matter of shared responsibility. In his view, companies in each category of the supply chain in the private sector, customers, civil society and the state have the responsibility for their share of social responsibility:

This is not only the responsibility of the producer, it is the responsibility of the entire value chain, and also of the state. Because it is useless for me from my humble place to make all the effort I make if I do not have a livelihood from the state, in this case to solve the issue of waste disposal. (Interview 5 August 2019).

Several managers share this view and especially companies that would be considered small and medium-sized motivated this with a lack of resources and also a lack of supportive infrastructure to conduct their agricultural activities. Their CSR engagement needs to therefore address basic needs that are not covered by state institutions and which turn into problems for the communities because they are not covered (e.g. fires because of lacking electricity infrastructure).

In the Tucumán region we identified several companies that collaborate with a consultancy on social issues. One company argues that up until collaborating with this consultancy, they were not aware of the poor living conditions of their own employees.

I was involved with social activities personally but never with the company. [The consultancy owner] and I established the food bank in Tucumán. [...] We discussed with [consultancy company] about a project for our employees. They have architects, psychologists, social workers [...] they talked to the families and at the end they showed us the results and it was very surprising for us because we didn't know how bad the living conditions of our people were. (Interview 26 August 2019)

Orcos *et al.* (2018) categorize consultancies as market-supporting institutions that facilitate capital and information flows within a market and a regulation that encourages business development. They stimulate competitive advantage and while the consultancy owner argues for an ethical motivation of these companies to do these activities ('They really care' – Interview 27 August 2019) one underlying motive may be that as first-movers these CSR activities increase competitiveness in the market for these companies and enable an easier entrance into new markets (Tetrault Sirsly and Lamertz, 2008). For example, when attempting to enter new markets, companies with a good CSR reputation rarely face the same level of resistance as companies with poor CSR reputations (Lougee and Wallace, 2008). The company owner also mentions that the unpredictable political situation in Argentina makes the agricultural sector highly competitive and those companies have a higher chance of survival that constantly invest in new technology and approaches. On the other hand, the companies collaborating with this consultancy company are engaged in an interactive environment that fulfills the gap of expertise the company needs to be able to address social issues. Campbell (2007) underlined that corporations will be more likely to act in socially responsible ways if there are private, independent organizations in their environment that monitor their behavior and mobilize to change it.

We also find that in the case of sugarcane or citrus growers who produce for international markets, the pressure from international clients is much higher for exporting than for domestic producers to comply with social and environmental standards. One manager argues: ‘Coca-Cola was our motor...they started asking us about the ISO 14000 standard of food safety. [...] if we cannot accomplish their suggestions, we have to cancel our lemons to them.’ Not only does the lack of pressure from domestic formal regulations and organizations (e.g. NGOs) in this respect come here to the fore but also the lack of an educational institutional environment with a larger availability of specialized programs that can prepare professionals for better approaching environmental and social issues. Two CSR managers underlined that they identified the need to have a higher education in environmental and social issues to be able to handle certification matters and manage NGO programs. For this purpose, upon own initiative they took up environmental engineering and social project management qualifications: ‘Higher education specialization with focus on environmental and social issues applicable for the corporate environment is not common in Argentina and is difficult to study in any location.’ (Interview 22 August 2019). International standards and norms may thus further spark the need of professionals to specialize in social and environmental fields, which may increase the request and availability of educational specializations in these sectors. The ‘country-of-origin-effect’ may be able to unfold thus also at the level of educational development in Argentina and play an important role in how social issues are addressed in the future by agricultural companies.

■ *Local expectations (from educational and health organizations)*

Interviewees also underline that an expectation to be involved within the communities they are active in is present and usually these activities unfold through existing local educational and health organizations, such as schools and NGOs. In this respect, those social issues can be attended to that the local specialists identify and have the expertise and resources to attend to. ‘The directors of the schools tell [the company CSR representative] what they need for topics such as gender diversity, child labor.’ (Interview 22 August 2019). Additional social issues may exist but the companies are either not aware of them or do not have the means (own financial or human resources and suitable local organizations) to address them. In this sense, international certification standards act in some cases as a pull factor for becoming more aware of social issues and tuned in to one’s environment.

Local educational and health organizations seem to play a key role in the types of social issues the company managers identify. Where schools and NGOs focusing on education, healthcare and problems such as alcoholism, womens’ access to employment exist, companies not only have a pressure but an incentive and a gateway to address those problems, with resources (e.g. human resources with expertise in those communities and with social issues) they may only difficultly be able to put into place. These organizations thus play a key role in pointing to which the main social issues are that need to be addressed. Relying on a number of local organizations and people also entails that certain social issues will remain unaddressed. In this context, a manager in one company underlined that some people do not want to be helped or are not interested in the programs put at their availability and underlines the necessity of cooperation with communities: ‘It depends a lot on the communities if they are receptive [...] which is not easy.’ (Interview 22 August 2019).

Berger *et al.* (2005) had pointed out that more proactive companies in Argentina have formed partnerships with NGOs, which have a closer relationship with poorer communities. However, the needs of poorer groups are not solicited or not integrated into CSR strategies, Berger *et al.* (2005) argue. One interviewee also mentions that: ‘Maybe there are some communities that I still don’t know about.’ (Interview 15 August 2019). However, as another interviewee argues CSR activities is not only a question of money but ‘it is a question of who takes care of a good application of this money’. (Interview 6 August 2019). Thus not only the presence of NGOs with the expertise of developing certain projects is important but also the trust these organizations can impart. As we find, institutions such as trust and local organizations play a key role for companies in addressing the communities’ needs.

Furthermore, a lack of pressure by the government and municipalities exists, as the interviewees argue unanimously that they do not have any pressure from them. Also, those social issues appear to have immediacy, which aside from local NGOs, health and educational organizations, employees point to. Usually these are case-by-case events where an employee is assisted with a loan or with support for education of his child, with treatment of a health issue, etc.: '[...] we have many policies in our company for credits, for helping, for scholarships for their kids.' (Interview 28 August 2019). Even if interviewees argue that they allocated a small amount of their budget (between 1-2%) to addressing CSR issues, in a context in which the state has few resources to allocate for social issues and where the preconditions of economic and lawful activity are permanently at risk due to the highly volatile political and financial environment, these activities point to the ethical behavior of managers despite institutional weakness.

#### ■ *Individual values-motivated corporate social responsibility activities*

To analyze the individual values-driven motivation for undertaking CSR activities we adopted the grounded theory methodology. Complementary to thematic analysis, with grounded theory we can formulate a theoretical framework for the motivation that unites managers' perceptions from a variety of differing large farms. Individual values are one element that is repeatedly described by managers part of a family-owned company. As one interviewee argues, these values seem to be present independent of the pressure from certification schemes: 'We are certified since eight or ten years ago. But the culture of the company as a family business meant we were involved in all the communities. Not certified but we did that work. We don't change our culture or our manner of working because of certification.' (Interview 2 September 2019). Different dimensions form this motivation. 14 out of 18 managers interviewed make reference to individual values that motivate them to conduct CSR activities.

#### ■ *Identification*

A culture of philanthropic activities has been historically present in Argentina. Dating back to colonial times the Catholic Church promoted charity organizations to address issues such as homelessness (Newell and Muro, 2006). Eva Peron later consolidated this trend of philanthropy for the poor, called *asistencialismo*, with the programs for hospitals, children's homes and refuges for young women that she devised through her foundation. During the 1970s due to the repression of military dictatorship traditional ways of civic engagement disappeared. Engagement by the state in civil society elements fell away and community-based and self-help organizations formed (Newell and Muro, 2006). Later with rising levels of capital investment CSR ideas came to grow in the 1990s and several groups of companies became active in this respect. Privatization resulted in an increased role of the private sector in areas it had been previously absent such as health and education (Newell and Muro, 2006). Company managers, however, do not point to such a cultural influence on their motivations. A reason for not explicitly mentioning culture to be an element of influence may be the family as a reference point: 'We always participated in NGOs or social activities. [...] It is part of the 'sense', because it is a family company. [...] It is our family's approach.'

One interviewee argues that a cultural element may be present as a motivating factor for undertaking CSR activities. However, in the case of this agricultural company, individual values of the owners and managers are a criterion with more weight in choosing to engage in CSR activities. While not mutually exclusive, individual values can be driven by culture and norms and vice versa. Schnebel (2000) has shown that the values that a person is committed to are deeply rooted in their social and socio-cultural background.

Marques *et al.* (2014) have shown that individual values such as identification are more frequent in the discourse of family firms. The value of 'identification' is expressed by managers through an emotional attachment to CSR activities because of the role of family tradition and references to the founder's legacy. In the literature this discourse is connected to the socio-emotional wealth approach (Marques *et al.*, 2014): 'The CSR Manager has a strong imprint of her father's legacy.' (Interview 16 August 2019). The managers describe at least one of the owner's values to be the foundation for individual values that motivate corporate social responsibility activities.

### ■ Benevolence

Managers expressed a will ('voluntad' from *in vivo* coding) to have an overall positive contribution to society and the communities they are active in. We associate this to Schwartz's (2012) value of benevolence. Benevolence values emphasize voluntary concern for others' welfare. Critical here are the relations with the family and primary groups. For the companies the primary groups constitute the employees and the communities (e.g. 'We belong to our community and we think you can't be well if the people around you are not well'; they are friends [the owners] they see Argentina, they see the reality, they see what things are happening and say: 'We have the money, we should help, what can we do? 'It is not a great strategy, it is just: let us help.') (Interview 6 August 2019).

At the same time, managers' normative motivations are associated with benevolence. No financial motive is mentioned as an underlying reason for this motivation but rather an intrinsic motivation to do good. This is in line with what Freeman and Liedtka (1991) described as 'new conversation' instead of CSR. From this perspective companies represent an interconnected web of different interests, which combine caring goals, as a form of altruistic behavior, with a pragmatic behavior that gives them the opportunity to express creativity and personality. Within this framework 'self-creation' and 'community creation' do not exclude each other but constitute an adaptive process. Further arguments of the interviewees complement this view as they mention that they do not react to current pressures, as these are non-existent but adapt themselves to future societal demands.

### ■ Obligation

Jackson and Apostolakou (2009) and Oliver (1991) contend that in some cases the patterns of CSR activities show a lack of national institutions and act as potential substitutes for these. Similarly, Frynas (2005) and Amaeshi *et al.* (2006) based on a study in the Gulf of Guinea region and Nigeria, respectively, found that CSR provides a social buffer where public institutions are weak, especially in the social domain where the role of government is limited and falls short to address social issues (Jamali and Neville, 2011). While we have shown the lack of pressure from national formal institutions, it could be assumed that managers proactively attempt to fill institutional voids. However, our interviewees argue that their activity is not a matter of overtaking the responsibility of the state (even if communities often perceive them as the state, because as companies they are the ones to react to inquiries for assistance: 'People have very high expectations from us. They want us to take politician's responsibilities, to be the 'intendente' (translation from Spanish – mayor), to be in charge of the community'). However, as this interviewee argues, she considers having the obligation to capacitate people to have good education and access to seeds to grow their own food, rather than only donating money.

One interviewee argued that social responsibility is a personal obligation:

The 2,4-D herbicide does not do anything bad on its own, it depends what is done with it. No one would think of banning alcohol because when people drink and drive they kill people. Therefore, the responsibility of doing things well is of oneself. (Interview 5 August 2019)

The interviewee acknowledges that the problem with misuse of herbicides exists but that it does not necessarily require a ban on the products, but rather more education and heavier enforcement as the ultimate responsibility lies with the person who applies it. Another interviewee states:

It is a system. The state has more responsibilities, the companies have another, and the people have another. We all have a part of responsibility. (Interview 15 August 2019).

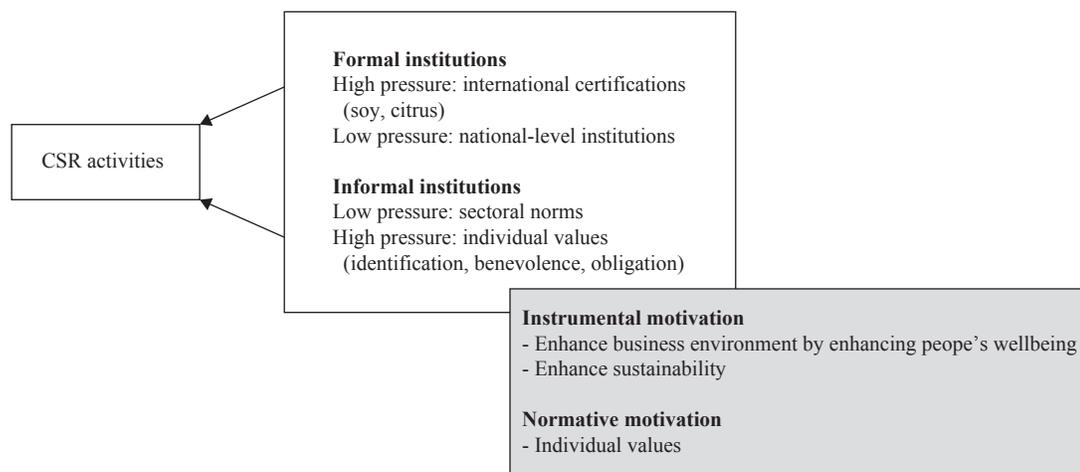
From a utilitarian perspective Secchi (2007) and Perez (2002) argue for an either or responsibility assumption, by either the state or the corporation. The companies however regard their responsibility in a frame of 'collective responsibility', in which each entity in society has its share of responsibility. This is why company

managers argue also for the future sharing of responsibilities between themselves and the state in a format in which all entities have an obligation to address social issues but also have a supportive frame to do that. Without the support of the state one interviewee argued that companies may solve one social issue but may be easily prone to create another one:

I cannot solve my own problem and generate another one ... There are fields which I rent that have no water and are 30 km from my own fields. I have a well of 60 m depth that I could use to make the applications. I can do it, but it is not right, because I should implement other types of actions. And that's what I did. My systematization process causes all the surplus water to come together in three dams, and that is the water that I use for my applications. (Interview 5 August 2019)

The farmer underlines that a basic part of farming infrastructure-water connection-is not available to him in some farm locations. If he would be unethical in his conduct he could use the water from the well as no other possibility exists, but that would leave the community with no water source. He finds such an action to be unethical ('it is not right') and instead of doing it he decided to invest in technology that collects the surplus water from one activity and redirects it to another activity where it is needed. This alternative is regarded as an obligation ('I should'). This is an additional pointer to the companies perceiving the state as incapable of addressing social issues, whether because of lack of resources, corruption or incompetence. It also points to the institutional void in what would be basic infrastructure for agricultural activity, as this type of infrastructure is lacking according to the interviewee.

A shared participation between government, companies and society has been discussed as 'relational CSR' (Albareda *et al.*, 2008). The authors argue that governments would have a mediating role to manage the complex set of relationships between the different actors. However, considering the weak institutional capacity of Argentina, the state may have a difficulty in enabling structures that are consistent with the behavior to be promoted in the agricultural sector. Figure 3 gives an overview of the institutions and their level of pressure on managers' motivation to conduct CSR activities.



**Figure 3.** Depicting the determinants for social responsibility activities among primary agriculture companies with individual values (informal institution) as main motivating factors despite other missing formal and informal institutions. Instrumental motivations overlap with ethical individual motivations.

## 6. Conclusions

Institutional theory argues that organizations are embedded within broader social structures that are composed of different types of institutions, which exert significant influence on the decision-making process of a corporation (Campbell, 2007; Campbell *et al.*, 1991). Additional work has underlined that CSR activities are framed within the existing social context and are thus influenced by institutions that are present in such contexts (Jackson and Apsotolakou, 2010). Our study finds that despite the lack of multiple entangled institutions, individual values of managers such as identification, benevolence and obligation are predominant in family-owned companies and motivate philanthropic CSR activities even in the absence of pressure from other formal and informal institutions. Local organizations such as schools, research institutes and a professional consultancy group, in the case of Tucumán, further enable managers to transpose their ethical and instrumental motivations into a variety of CSR activities. These organizations are enabling organizations that channel resources to more systematic and substantive forms of CSR. For the interviewed managers in family-owned companies the main motivating factor for CSR activities constitute these managers' individual values, while other formal and informal institutions, whether regulative, normative or cognitive lack or exert less pressure. Isomorphism between the companies is less feasible as cognitive institutions are not present to pose a pressure on the companies.

There is a weakness or absence of normative societal expectations and lack of positive peer pressure at least as experienced by these managers. The managers express a moral responsibility toward society driven by future normative societal expectations. Companies collaborate at different levels with NGOs, public institutions (e.g. schools, academic institutions, health organizations) to develop the social and environmental projects that mirror their core competences. Since there are no perceived incentives from the state or from civil society as yet to conduct such activities, and since the majority of companies do not engage in CSR activities in Argentina as stated by our interviewees (interview 15 August 2019; interview 26 August 2019), the interviewed companies act as first-movers in their fields in establishing collaborative projects. The only demand or pressure comes from international buyers in the case of citrus or soy production, who impose certification standards. The local community poses weaker pressure while national-level institutions are not perceived to exercise pressure at all. Individual values keep companies undertaking philanthropic activities independent of instrumental motivations and pressure of other formal and informal institutions.

From the point of CSR definition encompassing those companies who behave in a manner that is beneficial, or at least not detrimental, to a larger group of stakeholders our study shows that these companies may address certain social issues but fail to address others. They cannot be regarded as 'social champions' in this respect. However, in the context of a majority of agricultural entities not engaging in CSR activities (interview 26 August 2019), the motivations of these companies as well as the impact their activities have on stakeholders require further analysis.

The main social issues the companies perceive to be salient in rural areas in Argentina are poverty and education. Individual values are a motivating factor for CSR activities that target these issues. Similar findings are highlighted by Bavorová *et al.* (in press) and Visser *et al.* (2019), suggesting the presence of intrinsic motivations of farm managers in Russia to showing responsibility for the local community.

The question remains what actions can be taken to further inspire or foster CSR activities. Farmers' associations can play a significant role in making the results of these activities visible as well as those farming companies who are forerunners in their undertakings. More emphasis on the role of individual values in the farming operations may incentivize farming companies to gather resources for collectively addressing certain issues.

## 7. Limitations and further research

There are also limitations to our methodology. This research is based on the perceptions of the managers and their indications of individual values and the actions they undertake. Our research can be complemented by longitudinal studies that would observe the real actions and conduct interviews with the beneficiaries (assuming they feel free to speak) and the communities the companies are active in. Our study allows primarily to study managers' views on and motivations for CSR, but not CSR actions themselves or their impacts.

There is a possible bias because of our selection methods. We could therefore assume our interviewees to respond positively about their behavior due to a social desirability bias. However, the companies ranked their CSR involvement at different levels.

We have only interviewed managers and further studies could analyze whether the individual values are spread also at organizational level through a corporate culture.

Our research further contributes to the CSR and institutional theory literature and finds that value-driven managers do exist in the regions studied. Understanding the broader institutional framework in which these values and associated CSR activities exist may give additional insights into the motivations for acting socially responsible amongst managers in large farms and agrohholdings. Further studies on social responsibility activities of large farms and agrohholdings active in regions confronted with issues of land access, deforestation and other social and environmental issues, as well as on those farms that do not undertake CSR activities, will contribute to a more overarching understanding of formal and informal institutions shaping farms' social responsibility.

The advantage of our methodology, using thematic analysis and grounded theory, is that CSR activities may remain undetected as the majority of companies in this study do not communicate about them or do not explicitly formulate them as CSR activities. This can easily be mistaken as an absence of responsibility and an absence of motivation to involve in socially responsible activities.

Our research contributes to the work conducted so far on CSR (Gagalyuk and Schaft, 2016; Heyder and Theuvsen, 2012; Ortega *et al.*, 2016; Visser *et al.*, 2019) in the agricultural sector and extends the view that individual motivations play an important role in undertaking CSR activities. Also, while Visser *et al.* (2019) found CSR to be a public-relations type of activity in one region in Russia, with instrumental motivations for CSR prevailing, in another studied region, the motivations were more mixed, with stronger intrinsic (social) motivations. Our study shows that instrumental and ethical considerations for CSR activities do not exclude each other but are both present. Furthermore, we have found companies to acknowledge that they cannot address all social issues, that they may be unaware and would not have the capacity to address these. This is why our research may partly confirm Berger *et al.*'s (2005) findings that the needs of poorer groups are not solicited or not integrated into CSR strategies. Our findings point however to the important role that local organizations play in addressing social issues. Further research can investigate the collective roles of these organizations and of agricultural companies to address social issues.

We have also pointed to the fact that the poverty and educational issues the interviewees point to are part of an institutional setting that reflects a culture for 'asistencialismo' (assistance) as well as the turbulent financial environment in Argentina. We find that the companies consider themselves a minority in their sector to act socially responsible. Our research also complements Filatotchev and Nakajima (2014) work to show the dynamics of individual and institutional motivations for CSR. Further focus on CSR in the agricultural sector would extend this work by also analyzing CSR at organizational level as well as interactions between the individual, organizational and institutional levels.

Jamali *et al.* (2009) found that in developing countries personal motivations for CSR philanthropic activities characterize small-and-medium sized enterprises. In the case of our interviewed companies we show that this can also be the case with large enterprises, where the owners' individual values and commitment drive

the engagement in CSR activities. Further research can focus on the understanding of the role different farm categories play in addressing and preventing social issues in rural areas. Studies analyzing the types of activities conducted by small farms as well as the different size categories of small and large farms would create a more encompassing picture of the benefits created for communities and hurdles farms face in addressing social issues. Looking into the different characteristics of these farms such as ownership, legal structure may increase the insights on similarities and differences of CSR motivations between different farm size categories, including agroholdings. The framework depicted in Figure 1 can also be applied to other institutional contexts for comparative studies.

## Supplementary material

Supplementary material can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.22434/IFAMR2020.0103>

**Table S1.** Types of CSR activities and responsible engaging with CSR activities.  
List of interview questions.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no known competing interests.

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