

# Unions and Decisionistic-Restricted Involvement in the CSR Debate – An Explanation to a Cooperative Approach

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## Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) implies the responsibility of companies for sustainable management in economic, ecological and social terms. The majority of CSR works in science and research were written primarily with the focus on ethics (moral vs. market economy), bearer of responsibility (state vs. companies) and management (e.g. best practice, manuals). This article comes from the perspective of a stakeholder group that is constantly mentioned but receive insufficient attention: unions. Research indicated early on that unions leaned back in the European CSR-debate since its beginning 2001. Based on the case of German unions, the author will analyse their motivation by studying their statements. The systematic literature review provides the basis for his qualitative content analysis of reasonable motives. The results show the unions encountering a complex environment with diverse interests, in which it is difficult to position themselves. Furthermore CSR requirements placed on companies were considered, by economy, to be set very high. Although CSR is not driven by legal regulations, it unfolds quasi-binding rules. For those reasons, it is not surprising that unions were sceptical and restrictive. With its analysis of a defensive CSR strategy, the study contributes to progress in the field of engagement in international debates. The author deals in a theoretical-conceptual way with the existing research results in this field, invalidates them and presents his own attempt with explanation. His explanatory approach extends the existing explanatory patterns by a new perspective for the problem described.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, unions, industrial relations, CSR debate in EU, CSR actors

## Introduction

Companies have been increasingly criticized for numerous incidents of immoral behaviour in public debate. The population is becoming ever more sensitive to those reports and the patterns of behaviour they describe, especially when it comes to high profits coupled with a reduction in jobs and high executive salaries and severance pay in times of economic crisis or scandal. To become more social and to accept more responsibility, some concepts have been brought up over the past years. Corporate social responsibility (CSR)—the assumption

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of social responsibility through integration into their business activities—is one of the concepts that can help companies out of the reputational crisis. The content-related facets of this concept create a field of tension of diverse interests, which can be partly heterogeneous and conflicting. CSR cannot therefore be viewed in isolation from the stakeholder approach, as the two thematic areas are closely intertwined. Thus the ‘integration ... in terms of content, time and communication and the structural and procedural implementation into the company's activities, as well as the securing of long-term interrelationships with the relevant stakeholder groups [belong to its] central components’ (Meffert & Münstermann, 2005, p. 22). CSR basically represents the ‘way in which a company treats its stakeholders ... to put it succinctly’ (de Colle, 2004, p. 526).

Against the backdrop of the complexity of the CSR debate in theory and practice, which has been going on for years, the subject of this study emerged. The debate does not take place in a vacuum but is situated within a large circle of participants in which value conflicts and areas of conflict had built up, emotions were heated and polarized camps formed. As might be expected, there are power interests and struggles between stakeholders who want to rival one another and influence the shaping of political will-formation to their benefit. These participants also include the interest groups, in this study above all the German units, which - like the other actors - want to meet the expectations of their members and are therefore obliged to point out (re) actions. As a result, the various actors develop ideas and concepts that are primarily based on the enforcement of their position or interest representation. For his study, the author selects from the various CSR stakeholder groups.

For the author, the basis for the selection of the stakeholder group was their justified claims for involvement in the CSR debate. In this area, the author was particularly struck by the fact that the stakeholder ‘unions’ were inconspicuous in the debate, so he used this characteristic as a decisive selection criterion and consequently had a need for clarification. Preuss, Gold and Rees (2015) stated that various social actors have contributed to the global spread of CSR. Against this background, it is very strange that the unions as one of the social actors that hardly make an appearance. As part of their traditional role as employee representatives, they should participate in the discussion on the relationship between companies and stakeholders, especially in times of international labour cost competition. It is therefore appropriate to examine how European unions view the rise of CSR (Preuss et al., 2015, p. 1). Eleven countries were selected in their corresponding empirical study: United Kingdom, Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia. Rees, Preuss and Gold (2015) noted

that European unions have taken an unclear attitude about CSR. In principle, the concept is supported, but scepticism remains about the application and effectiveness of CSR measures. Respondents often view CSR as being geared to the company's reputation rather than a real focus on improvements in working conditions and more responsible business practices. In addition, they see their role or power in the social dialogue being endangered. In some countries, union involvement is more visible compared to others. Numerous CSR union initiatives have been launched in Finland, France, Lithuania, Spain and the United Kingdom (Rees et al., 2015, p. 220). In Germany, which is considered to be a strongly institutionalised country with codified union rights and the principle of ‘social partnership’, the unions are of great importance for the national economic system. This makes it all more striking that CSR still ‘appears to be a relatively uncharted territory’ (Rees et al., 2015, p. 204).

Research and the author's own impressions quickly showed that foremost the German unions ‘wall up’ when it comes to CSR and they had taken a passive or reserved attitude at the beginning of the debate. The wall tactics of the commonly aggressive unions is and remains questionable, because fundamentally different expectations are attached to them. Passive behaviour, however, is contrasted by a radical tone as a striking criterion. Unions suggest resolute action, but there has been precious little sign of this so far. Their message has not changed in the course of the debate. In most cases, employee-relevant CSR aspects are in the foreground, even if CSR is much more than responsibility toward employees.

The described ‘hide and seek’ tactic of the unions is and remains questionable because their appearance is historically and generally known and seen as aggressive and provocative (see Kessler, 1907, p. 20: ‘Union is throughout the primary, the employers’ association the secondary appearance. The union attacks by its nature, the employers’ association defends’.). People also remember times when ‘words ... [like] ... unions ... were associated with tremendous suggestive force that inspired the masses’ (Factory Workers Union of Germany, 1930, p. 94). Since the unions also want to be recognized as a pillar of democracy and it is so ‘important’ that they will ‘raise their voice’ (member of the German Bundestag/parliament MdB Schieder, 2016), their wall tactics are also questioned against this background. Another reason why the unions' wall tactics are questionable is that CSR—to put it somewhat exaggeratedly—is not an issue for the Federal Criminal Police Office, but a public and social issue. This makes it all the more interesting for the researching author to penetrate and advance where he finds himself in front of imaginary closed doors.

From the author's point of view, it remains to be stated that the attitude of the unions in this context is not yet sufficiently scientifically developed and can be quite well distinguished from the otherwise dominant topics. These circumstances are underpinned by the lack of empirically verified documents in the literature, in which the explicit question about the causes of passive behaviour was put to the unions, possibly also due to a lack of willingness to testify and a reserved attitude to the matter. So, it is left to the author to analyse the motives of the unions' decisionistic-restricted attitude and to answer the following research question: *What are the causes of the unions' decisionistic-restricted attitude, when CSR is being debated?*

CSR has brought the economy and politics in with their demands intensive debate. The author's observations are intended to provide sufficient clues for his conjecture that a particular core is behind this decisionistic-restricted involvement, as one would normally expect. He will make his own attempt to explain this attitude.

## Central Terms

Since the publication of the CSR EU Green Paper in 2001, all socially connected actors in the economic cycle have been forced to familiarize themselves with the CSR term. Responsibility has become a politically relevant term for companies in Europe. The Green Paper documents a definition that is always referred to in the European CSR debate:

Most definitions of corporate social responsibility describe it as a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis. Being socially responsible means not only fulfilling legal expectations, but also going beyond compliance and investing 'more' into human capital, the environment and the relations with stakeholders (European Commission, 2001, p. 7).

Based on this definition further publications were published at irregular intervals. The first 'follow-up' was made in 2002 (European Commission, 2002). The Commission continues to adhere to the definition in the Green Paper; the CSR has not been notified of any change to this effect. The basic concept thus remains unchanged, even in the second 'follow-up' in 2006. Moreover, the Commission briefly summarized the work of the specifically established multi-stakeholder CSR forum and notes not only 'consensus among participants, but...also... significant differences of opinion between business and non-business stakeholders. ...There was no consensus, however, on topics such as company reporting requirements or the need for European standards

on CSR' (European Union, 2006, p. 5). The 3rd follow-up from 2011 includes a new CSR definition and a renewed strategy (European Commission, 2011). CSR is redefined as 'the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society. Respect for applicable legislation, and for collective agreements between social partners, is a prerequisite for meeting that responsibility' (European Union, 2006, p. 6). The voluntariness has not only disappeared expressly from the definition but, according to Schneider, is also 'strongly relativized' within the release. In the first papers in 2001 and 2002, the aspect of voluntariness was used 'almost inflationary' (Schneider, 2012, p. 22).

Despite the more binding nature of the commission's CSR-definition of 2011 presented in comparison to the previous ones, the most recent communication for the proponents of binding is unlikely to be a success. This 'product... will disappoint those calling for far more regulation of business' (Grayson, 2011).

In the broader context critics of CSR often warn and relate to 'greenwashing', which claims that companies have clean hands but are actually willing to engage in dubious business practices (such as child labour in supplier industries). Credibility in this respect poses a challenge or 'particular dilemma in the CSR debate.' Ensuring economic system stability and at the same time not jeopardizing sustainable development - in times of climate change and scarcity of resources - would take into account a possible 'reorientation' of the social market economy (Riess, 2012, p. 782). If, according to Milton Friedman (1970), the only social responsibility of companies would only be to make a profit. CSR is and remains ambivalent for companies.

Essentially, the unions are concerned with turning voluntarily into a legal obligation for CSR fields of action for companies. It is precisely this attribute of voluntarism that their opponents—the business association—want to maintain. They have pled since the beginning of the debate and move from this project not a millimetre. Furthermore, they are far more present in their membership representation than the unions. A consensus with the unions on the crux of the matter, namely voluntariness, has so far hardly been found.

## State of Research

The scientific debate on CSR in Germany was initially triggered by economic and corporate ethics, mostly on a theoretical basis, while Anglo-American business ethics operated more practically oriented research. It is noticeable, however, that the CSR content has always been encompassed other terms. The demarcation of related concepts such as

sustainability, corporate citizenship, economic and business ethics proves to be difficult and confusing overall, as there is still no common CSR definition, which further affects the scientific debate. Often the discussion is carried out from different perspectives on these topics without explicitly referring to CSR. In relation to the flood of publications on CSR the attitude of the national trade unions in this regard is limited to a very small group of scientific publications. A first 'pitch' often mentioned in the literature was concisely made by Preuss et al. (2006) on an international level in a country comparison. The authors stated that the union role and influence of CSR depended in particular on the respective country and its framework conditions, and that CSR is also recognized as a threat by the unions. In general, CSR represents a new terrain for the European unions where the voluntary nature of entrepreneurial engagement contrasts with a legally binding duty of care for employees in Europe. Nationally limited—but very detailed—Mutz and Egbringhoff (2006) studied the attitude of German works councils in the CSR debate and their involvement in implementing relevant standards in the companies. At this point in the CSR debate, it was also clear among the expert community that unions initially behaved more passively than actively.

Frequently cited in the relevant German CSR literature and similar conviction are also Hauser-Ditz and Wilke (2004, p. 7) whose study came to a similar conclusion that, *inter alia*, 'German unions' reaction is ... characterised by restraint'. This view is sometimes represented in the union ranks as well.

Of notable relevance and important sources are two studies published by the union-linked Hans Böckler Foundation: On an empirical basis Zimpelmann and Wassermann (2012) provided a conceptual analysis of the relationship between the traditional model of social partnership, the codetermination 'arena' and the emerging CSR arena. They can recognize 'at least no dominant role' in employee representation as actors. And they noted a fragmentary state of research. Vitols' (2011) literature report offers a large overview about the activities and positions of the employee representatives at national and international level. In terms of unions' activities following points essentially were made: the relatively late time of the unions' statement of determining positions in 2005 is criticised. Particularly in 2009 the unions became active.

Haunschild and Krause (2015) have followed the development of the debate in the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) and selected affiliated unions and their positions on a recent empirical basis. In the accompanying anthology the editors Preuss et al. (2015) noted that the topic of how unions deal with CSR and its rise is significant but has remained 'under-researched' so far (p. 10). It is striking that the unions - after all known as a social actor - are hardly noticed in the CSR-literature.

A dedicated study of the restricted unions' attitude in the context of CSR has been relatively unexplored in terms of its causes. There are always authors in the literature who mention the caution of the unions and that they only act hesitantly in the CSR debate. This general finding is hardly disputable even if occasionally union activities were mentioned. Thus, a considerable number of sources can be presented as evidence of restraint. However, there is a general lack of the exhaustiveness of arguments.

Only a few sources deal with this problem. Since empirically substantiated reasons are not available - although a deficit of theoretical expertise is also to be found - hypotheses are drawn up by the author on the basis of the previous considerations. Three explanatory models are used to illustrate the discussion. The study of the literature shows that the confrontation with their traditional tasks (Habisch & Wegner, 2005, p. 115) has taken a significant position. On this basis it can be concluded as the hypothesis 1. Another assumption which was found and seemed to influence a possible answer to the research question can be summarized in the second hypothesis: unions doubt that the companies mainly care for the social environment and the well-being of workers. They reasonably suspect CSR-active companies are not concerned with the benefits but with image reasons and place their lust for profit above all (Mutz & Egbringhoff, 2010, p. 280). Hypothesis 3 on unions' passivity (as an impression of its counterparts, BDA/German Employers' Association) illustrates the underestimation of the importance and failure of the unions (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, p. 38). Testing this hypothesis is guided by the question whether the unions consciously or unconsciously were blind to the CSR-issue or did not recognised it.

These three hypotheses are intended to serve as a theoretical guide to exploration and transition into the author's own approach.

## Material and Methodology

A qualitative methodology is used. A literature review prepares the conceptual basis and becomes the basis for the formulation of hypotheses. The functional analysis will examine the roles and functions of unions with regard to CSR. Over time, the attribution and allocation of union functions has been constantly changing and adapted to the changing social conditions. Nevertheless, their essential functions make a remarkable influence possible. In the political-economic context, they benefit from the strong added value of the German economy in international competition. An aggravating factor that needs to be considered is the environment in where they operate as social and political associations.

A secondary research through the content-analytical evaluation (document and text analysis) of existing material is carried out, which is aimed at a secondary-analytical reconstruction of the most important texts determining positions in the CSR debate. In addition to the above-mentioned CSR publications of the European Commission (2001, 2002, 2006, 2011), the statements of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and occasionally of individual unions are evaluated as relevant material.

## The Attitude of the German Unions Towards CSR

The presentation of this main chapter takes place in a structured sequence: the theoretical foundations of this study on unions are briefly presented in their entirety. Starting with a general introduction and leading to the thematic context, the aim is to ensure a close connection in terms of content. Chapter on CSR and unions' interrelationship establishes the thematic interface between unions and CSR as a basis for further investigation.

### Unions in Germany - Nature and Tasks

Historically, unions are entities, organizations that emerged under specific conditions and are shaped by political disputes and the level of economic development in each country. Their conditions of origin, as well as the political vicissitudes and economic cycles to which they were exposed, have been defeated as traditions in them, shaped their organizational forms and structures, and influenced their programmatic goals. ... They are the children of early industrialization and the accompanying proletarianization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Müller-Jentsch, 1997, p. 84).

They are a 'product of the social conflict between capital and labour within the framework of capitalist socialization', which defended itself as a solidarized and organized labour movement against material exploitation and social oppression through 'power structures' as a result of the 'increasing industrialization of capitalism' (Esser, 2014, p. 86). In this context, the terms 'counter-power' or 'counter-movement' are often referred to, because economic action is not only connected with 'exchange relations' with the social, but also the ecological environment, so that 'all goods and services, including the social and ecological Resources ... become goods and thus fall under the "laws" of the market.' In this respect, the 'countermovement' is concerned, on the one hand, with regulating the 'unrestricted use of social resources (the labour force) in the market economy'. On the other hand, 'beyond the social question' it is also about the 'use of natural resources'. Because 'basically, in both cases, it

is about questions of reproduction, once the labour force, on the other hand of nature.' The goal here is to contain the 'purely market-based use of resources' and 'to cause legal restrictions by political pressure. In current terms: It is about sustainable business, and in the wake of this development, institutions ... have arisen early in Germany' (Mutz, 2011, p. 69).

Their significant area of activity is legally stated since 1974: codetermination (Germany's law on employee co-determination). In the basic program of the German Trade Union Confederation (Bundesvorstand des DGB, 1949) codetermination is drawn up as the third pillar of a new economic order to signal the desired balance between labour and capital (Müller-Jentsch, 2001, p. 203). In the literature, the German union landscape is often referred to as the 'German model of industrial relations', which is characterized by the following five features: 'duality, intermediarity, juridification, centralization and representativeness' (Müller-Jentsch, 1995, p. 11). It is a common feature of this system that it relies on strong stakeholders. In the interplay between the employee and employer side, it becomes apparent 'that unions without the employers' associations are incomprehensible; conversely, the same applies' (Schroeder & Greef, 2014, p. 125). The German industrial relations system along with its structural features, owes its origin to its much cited success, especially in the post-war economic and political framework conditions, which were comparatively favourable in the past.

These structural features also fostered the combination of economic goals (such as labour productivity) and rising living standards. In conclusion, the German model can be finally stated:

The institutional framework of the dual system promoted, conditioned, and enforced strategies and policies of the involved actors, which strengthened the social consensus and contributed to a low level of conflict and high productivity (Müller-Jentsch, 1995, p. 16).

Due to its high system stability the German model could even be considered an exemplary role internationally until the 1980s (Schmidt & Trinczek, 1993, p. 169).

The end of the Second World War also meant an important organizational change, as the union landscape was rebuilt. The DGB unions became dominant players on the employee side and positioned themselves at the centre of industrial relations. The combination of unit and branch association principles became an organizational feature and at the same time a structure-forming centre of the German union model. New comprehensive organizations were to be founded which were united under the umbrella of the DGB (Schroeder & Greef, 2014, p. 125). The DGB - based in Berlin - acts

as the federation of unions. In accordance with its statute the DGB represents the common interests of all their member unions (DGB, 2018). The relationship between DGB and its members is characterized by a functional division. The function manifested to the DGB must be differentiated according to the external and internal relationship. Externally, it is responsible for the representation of his members towards politics. In the internal relationship with its members the DGB functions traditionally in two ways: it fulfils common tasks for all unions and creates a financial balance between small and larger affiliated unions. Furthermore, DGB acts as a general mediation and coordination office in the internal relationship of its members. Coordination is carried out in particular in the case of political opinions of the members on the assessment of draft legislation, (inter)national committees and policy areas. The arbitration function is carried out in competing conflicts of its affiliated unions, if delineation difficulties of organizational areas and/or the responsibility with new sectors occur. Organizing and coordinating all interests through the umbrella organization becomes more complicated as there are fewer member unions and an imbalance in member strength (Hassel, 2003, p. 108).

The DGB also formulates its claim to representation as follows:

Unions will remain interest-related combat organisations and social reform movements in the future. They must fight for a different future, for social alternatives, for the overcoming of socially unjust and ecologically intolerable conditions. They must develop resistance and counter-power as well as forward-looking initiatives and sustainable concepts in order to assert freedom and democracy, solidarity and justice (DGB, 1996, p. 2).

Following the unified union principle under an umbrella organisation, the DGB's claim to representation comprises a holistic approach. This requirement considers a representation of interests of all employees without consideration of political or religious opinion, occupation and status groups (Rüb, 2009, p. 133). Currently there are eight members (DGB, 2019a). The unions IG Metall (metalworkers), ver.di (united services) and IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie (mining, chemicals and energy) together register a DGB membership of more than 80%. In the other five unions, relatively homogeneous groups of employees are organized. Another distinguishing feature compared to the first three is that their financial resources and influence on the course of the DGB are much more limited (Schönhoven, 2014, p. 78).

As a political actor, the DGB cannot currently be ascribed any leadership role. Collective bargaining policy is the responsibility of the member unions, which coordinate it independently, especially since their specialist and policy departments have the appropriate resources to exert political

influence. They thus play an essential role as actors in collective bargaining policy for the labour market, while the DGB plays its role as coordinator of cross-union interests in the political arena at national and regional level, particularly in social policy matters (Schroeder & Greef, 2014, p. 130). The task of the DGB as coordinating body is made more difficult by the mergers of its members. Finding and coordinating an organisational conglomeration of all interests through the umbrella organisation becomes more complicated if there is a smaller number of member unions and an imbalance in membership strengths (Hassel, 2003, p. 108). 'In the shadow of the three giant associations' ver.di, IG Metall and IG BCE, the DGB 'scope ... for the independent representation of overarching interests and the development of own initiatives is even smaller than before' (Schönhoven, 2014, p. 78). Overall, it can be said that the structural and organisational balance of power of the German union model is currently characterised primarily by the fact that the resource-strong and self-sufficient individual unions are opposed by an umbrella organisation which tends to be weak in terms of resources (Schroeder & Greef, 2014, p. 128).

### **The Dual Nature of Unions: Interplay of Different Interests**

There is an understanding of literature that unions appear to be exposed to ambivalent effects in the performance of their functions. The thematization of the 'twofold character ... is almost as old as the trade unions themselves' (Müller-Jentsch, 2003, p. 654). Since then, researchers have been exploring how this ambivalence takes shape. Many theoretical considerations have arisen here. As 'first, immediate organizations of wage laborers and as an element of capital relations' they form a 'counter-power of the workers to the power of capital, but they are also a factor of order. Because they organize the workers and that means they organize them, they channel their anger, ... revolt and ... powerlessness. These roles can 'contradict each other in the crucial task of representing the interests of the working class in the economic and political conflicts. ... unions are always both; this dual character is a stigma attached to them since their creation' (Zoll, 1976, p. 7). Both options are not mutually exclusive because 'union policy always has, at least superficially, positive effects on the capitalist system, and union policy, which is inherently conditioned by the capitalist system, must recognize this system as the basis of its action' (Crusius & Wilke, 1971, p. 44).

The arrangement of a union twofold character can have different dimensions. 'The respective contents of the opposition conceptual pairs are highly variable' (Müller-Jentsch, 2003, p. 654). In the thematic context, reference is made here to professors Kurz-Scherf and Zeuner who made a worthwhile

contribution, which highlights the range in a differentiated und multifaceted manner. By exercising different roles and political perspectives, they define unions' 'in-between as a mode of existence.' Influenced by socio-economic change unions oscillate between

defending the achievements of the past and participating in a comprehensive restructuring of modern societies. In this contradictory simultaneity of opposition and cooperation the old ambivalence of the unions continues as a countervailing power and factor of order; at the same time, it is a manifestation of the structural problem of unions as a mediator of differing and contradictory interests - both internally and externally - in a situation of fundamental change of constellations of interests, conditions of action and challenges.

Kurz-Scherf and Zeuner also refer to Müller-Jentsch ('intermediary') from a conceptual-referential point of view ('the in-between') and exemplify the range of fields: 'the poles meditation is sought, mediator or mediation are varied, are diverse: capital and labour, state and society, politics and economics, democracy and capitalism, world of work and life. The unions are between different and contradictory structuring principles and logics of action of modern societies, and this 'in-between' characterizes their peculiarity as well as their internal and external ambivalences' (Kurz-Scherf & Zeuner, 2001, p. 147)

### CSR and Unions' Interrelationship

Regardless of how and whether CSR can 'be a useful tool to strengthen the social and environmental responsibility of companies' or whether this work should be prioritized to other actors, there are definitely connecting factors for employee representatives, in particular: defining social and environmental business goals, introducing CSR management systems, introduction of environmental and social reports, what content should be displayed, introducing codes of conduct, the organization of stakeholder dialogues and the question of which representatives should attend' (Heil, 2006, p. 8). In unions' conflict, any involvement will always occur when the legally guaranteed codetermination is might be restricted. Therefore, their concern is clear: CSR should be established as a complement to legal participation, not entrepreneurial flexibilization. On the other hand, the expanded organization of work resulting from globalization will give rise to new union fields of activity, which can be addressed through transnational re-regulation by means of supranational or international standards (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, p. 45).

Looking at the three big pillars of CSR (economy, environment and social involvement) and German unions the

thematic separation has just been as characteristic as the disregard for integrating an environmental and social dimension of sustainability into a common approach. Connecting lines between environmental, labour market and social policies were at best only addressed in the context of job security (Vitols, 2011, p. 69). This is proven by a few examples, e.g. since 1976 the German Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) has promoted its environmental and employment policy profile and positioning in its policy program (Gabaglio, 2003, p. 53).

Although the integration of environmental and social issues is a very difficult task, unions in Europe can not be denied that in recent decades they have ignored environmental issues in the workers' range of interests. In recent years, they have developed more and more to a social player, because they have faced up to the challenges of environmental policy and aroused practice-oriented policy approaches.

### Unions' Key Statements on the CSR Debate

In the early stages of the DGB and its affiliates - in terms of the number of publications - has kept more reserved in the debate since 2001. In its 2001 statement, the DGB basically supported the concept as the first reaction to the publication of the Green Paper. It is a significant 'impetus at European level on corporate social responsibility.' However, it quickly became clear that the DGB is sceptical of the voluntary approach and prefers a regulative variant: 'The DGB considers this to be inadequate' (DGB, 2001).

Several years later the DGB introduced its CSR-position a couple of times so the central positions can be identified and interpreted even more precise. Their basic outlines are (esp. DGB, 2009):

1. Voluntariness vs. binding status: CSR could only supplement binding rules, but never replace those. This position was clearly expressed from the beginning. This general postulate of a binding CSR regulation and the resulting maxims to oblige companies to implement social responsibility and the corresponding reporting form the path of their demands.
2. CSR and codetermination: CSR cannot be a substitute for codetermination. DGB department head Schneider criticizes in addition to the voluntary nature of voluntary commitments ('What is voluntary, can also voluntarily be left again. Therefore, CSR remains a fair weather organization.') a lack of benefit for participation: 'Where there are conflicts, ... the CSR standards are quickly up for debate. They cannot be effective. That's why CSR cannot be a substitute for co-determination' (Schneider, 2011, p. 58). But it may be noted that on the one hand the 'either-or'-discussion has been successfully overcome.

On the other hand CSR-instruments provide new scope in the work of the employee representatives that can supplement and revitalize codetermination (Zimpelmann, 2011). The concern of employee representatives that CSR could include participation and/or serve as a substitute, 'this goal is in Germany off the table'. Zimpelmann's and Wassermann's 2012 empirical study provides the opposite: 'Co-determination has been used by employee representatives as a trailblazer for voluntary social corporate responsibility right up to international framework agreements. ... Codetermination is a basis for CSR in Germany - not the other way around.' (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, p. 207).

3. After initial restraint, CSR and its development continue to be viewed critically and sceptically, despite their approach to the issue of participation in joint and establishment of their own initiatives, as well as a more nuanced and guided debate (esp. DGB 2009). In addition, it was clarified that this should not be regarded as a basically negative or 'non-negative' attitude (Hexel, 2011, p. 230). However, this does not suggest a complete endorsement. Such a restriction includes due caution in relation to the CSR concept.

The unions' scepticism is formulated in terms such as 'fair weather event' and framed as 'green-washing'. Due to the primarily profit-oriented motivation, this approach is viewed critically in the ranks of the trade unions. In doing so, they agree with the general critics that companies only have reputation effects in mind. But it also needs to be considered that the strategic messages that unions express are on the one hand between a 'confrontational' culture of dialogue based on 'naming and shaming' and on the other hand 'efforts to create framework agreements should be established by dialogue structures' (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, p. 23). The unions' statements are predominantly criticism papers, some of which conceive of stringing together similar content. The formulated criticisms focus on the voluntary nature of the debate on this position, which in accordance with the position in question constitutes the relevant resistance line.

A practice-oriented study project 2013 of the University of Münster comes to the conclusion that the employee representatives make the impression at that time, 'still in the search for their own, unified viewpoint in the CSR discussion' (University of Münster, 2013, p. 114).

DGB also issued an opinion on the recent publication of the European Union (directive 2014/95/EU). In the CSR reports, which have so far often been published on a voluntary basis, management was free to decide how and on what to report. The 2014/95/EU directive introduces a minimum degree of binding force. For the 2017 financial year, large companies

throughout Europe had to publish non-financial reports for the first time. The DGB confirms this directive as a step in the direction of more binding rules (DGB, 2016a, p. 2).

As these non-financial statements include employment and social matters those have an impact on labour relations, so as part of a project in 2016-2018 called 'DimasoLab' experts from 12 countries examined the possible impact of the Directive on industrial relations in Europe in order to contribute to a constructive debate on the role of unions and employee representatives in non-financial reporting. Unions and employee representatives concluded that non-financial reporting (NFIR) can make an important contribution to providing valuable information. In all countries it was criticised that although the NFIR contained extensive information, there was little coverage of the sensitive issues that were of most interest. In most cases, the data provided was unclear, excluding important information (e.g. subcontracting or supply chain). NFIR is rather seen as a marketing and communication strategy to meet the expectations of the financial community and rating agencies. As unions and employee representatives were not involved in this process, the decision on the content and nature of the information was entirely in the hands of management. It was agreed that a binding standard was needed to improve the quality and comparability of NFIR. In countries with a traditionally high quality of life and a strong culture of co-determination, such as Germany, the information value of NFIR was not considered to be particularly high, as other channels are used to obtain the required information (Arbeit & Leben, 2018, p. 87). Thannisch, DGB-official and responsible for CSR, has reiterated the results: 'Employee representatives on the supervisory board must be able to classify the non-financial reports ... . They can be important actors ... in verifying the accuracy of the information. The more ... detailed the reports are, the better employee representatives can ... demand social responsibility. Ideally works councils and unions should therefore be [involved] during the preparation of the reports' (Thannisch, 2018). Any demands such as higher involvement and critics (e.g. CSR as PR instruments) have already been formulated in previous opinions (e.g. DGB, 2009). In this respect the attitude towards CSR has not changed in the course of time.

#### ***Excursus: The Unions' Up-to-Date-Role as a Societal Actor and Thematic Integration into the Research Context***

Another context confirms the research findings and gap of this study. This will be demonstrated by a current role of unions as societal actors and a related concept.

From a strategic point of view, the concept of Porter and Kramer and 'Big Idea' exists besides CSR, called Creating



Shared Value (CSV): ‘the principle of shared value ... involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges. ... The concept ... focuses on the connections between societal and economic progress’ (Porter & Kramer, 2011). CSV and CSR address equivalent issues or rather pursue social and economic goals. Several multinational companies have committed themselves to CSV and CSR, for instance the Swiss foodstuff Company Nestlé (Nestlé, 2019, Good food, good life).

As already initiated in the previous chapters above unions are an association that primarily cares about the interests of employees (tasks like intercompany collective agreements, negotiations with the employers, organization of wage disputes e.g. strikes, advice and support on employment issues). Furthermore they represent special companies’ interests: well-being of workers and companies (twofold character or ‘dual nature of the unions). While the CSR and unions’ interrelationship has already been illustrated it must be stated that societal issues are addressed by unions as well. There are several examples they are engaged in:

- equal work equal pay (DGB, 2019b),
- right to further education (DGB, 2019c),
- safety at work (DGB, 2016b),
- reduction of working time (DGB, 2019d), and
- labour market integration (DGB, 2017).

As both concepts - CSV and CSR - are related to each other the author makes a first general conclusion in this subchapter: as a consequence of Porter and Kramer’s CSV it can be stated that CSR is desired societally and entrepreneurially. Unions represent special company and societal interests: enumerated issues above are partly union core issues but also address societal aspects. So the next conclusion is that unions contribute to a strong society and therefore to shared value.

A final conclusion that can be drawn from these comments: they underline the recognition that unions already initiated societal issues consistently alongside core business. As a consequence of this conclusion CSR should be more in unions’ focus. But the status quo is entirely different: (in light of the above explanations and state of research) CSR is barely considered by the unions. So further research regarding the reason(s) is required.

### ***Significance of the Results for Further Investigation and Reconciliation***

Even if concrete research results to answer the main question are still outstanding, a first interim conclusion should be given.

A union passive behaviour can be claimed to be empirically confirmed or at least initial assumptions can be confirmed. Hauser-Ditz and Wilke (2004) and Mutz and Egbringhoff (2004), in particular, affirmed this empirically, stating that a timid commitment was being made by works councils, even though ‘it is about original topics.’ Although the potential for discussion was high at an early stage, little was done by the unions. Passive behaviour, however, is countered by a radical tone as a striking criterion. Unions indicate they would take decisive action, but there is little sign of this at first. It is surprising that union statements were scarce at the beginning of the discussion around 2001 and if they were accompanied by scepticism and criticism. Fears of coexistence and a tension between co-determination and CSR were quickly introduced. The unions will always remain determined opponents of the course, to make co-determination rights looser. However, as early as 2004, Hauser-Ditz and Wilke (2004) produced initial empirical findings that did not indicate any intended deprivation of participation rights (p. 8). Thannisch (2009) also points to the fact that at least no explicit possible demands were placed in the debate (p. 335).

The increasing internationalization of economic activity, the environment and its relationships is relatively often addressed in the unions’ contributions, not without a reason. Very early ‘in the run-up to the Green Paper’, the German United Services Union Ver.di for instance became aware of this area, after all ‘things are addressed ... which also follow the unions with concern’ (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, p. 51). This progressive development and its consequences are not hidden from the unions, either. In this context they must be in a position to keep an eye on the protection of workers even under such conditions. The Europeanization and globalization of union and works council work has been intensified in the wake of the rise of the CSR. Clearly a need for action was seen here.

In the thematic context it is doubtful whether CSR is a classic union topic. There are disagreements in science and practice. Sometimes proximity is produced, sometimes distance. At least one principle of kinship can be expected, as original trade union issues are attached. In summary, it can be stated that areas are recognizable and symbolic relationships can be established that represent trade union territory. However, ambiguities could be detected early in the statements. Therefore it is not surprising why ‘over here ... the DGB deals with its topic ... rather cautiously.’ In this context it should be mentioned: the global age holds various political and practical challenges in the broader sense; and in the narrow sense one finds oneself in the situation of the defence of the well-tried legal codetermination model, so that on the whole a ‘caution ... with voluntary forms of corporate social responsibility seems to be understandable’ (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, pp. 46, 57). This (strategic) caution is in need of explanation.

## Setting and Discussing the Hypotheses about Reasoned Unions' Decisionistic-Restricted Involvement

In the following chapter, we illustrate and order the central research question of the selected variety of explanatory approaches through hypotheses. In the further course, these hypotheses serve as a theoretical guide to exploration and transfer into one's own approach. These three initial hypotheses are:

### Hypothesis 1: Traditional Causes

#### *Presentation and Analysis*

The study of the technical literature shows that in this context the confrontation with unions' traditional tasks has taken a significant position. In the discourse perspective has been represented several times: in an interview in 2012 the German business associations 'future' and 'BAUM' expressed themselves 'sobered by unions and employee representatives ... also because the employee representatives in sustainability issues could be more competent and active.' The 'future' interviewee said: 'I still see the unions in their traditional image' (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, p. 43). Segal et al. concluded in a 2003 European study that CSR along with its initiatives is intervening in the traditional union domain. Understanding this as a 'fundamental challenge' is being pushed aside by the unions. A missing direct CSR 'mandate' turns out to be problematic (Segal et al., 2003, p. 44).

Friedrich und Hadasch even recognize a generally restrictive attitude in the German engagement debate and extend their findings to all actors:

On the contrary, the traditional socio-political actors seem to have a wait-and-see attitude that is characterized by traditional role models and the avoidance of clear positions. ... The outlined positions of socio-political actors can be understood as an expression of routine-based interpretation patterns of a (new) topic. The actors position themselves on the basis of proven and familiar routines, which, however, meet changed framework conditions. ... The debate suggests a revival of a traditional sense of engagement (Friedrich & Hadasch, 2010, p. 138).

If one reads the preceding statements that support hypothesis 1, one thing is quickly pointed out: this approach, which is taken as a 'traditional' justification and not yet revised, assumes that CSR and traditional trade union lines do not seem to be compatible. In order to develop this hypothesis, it is first necessary to recall the traditional tasks or traditional role of unions and briefly specify them in order to develop an understanding of this assumption.

Union work in Germany is historically served by the following major and classic tasks and functions: as a protective organization against disproportionate capitalist labour use they resolutely act on behalf of their members. Labour market, pay policy including social policy in negotiation with business associations (principle of conflict and social partnership). Through the regulation of industrial relations, they influence the economic policy as an 'intermediary' organization and consequently participate in shaping the entire economic and social system. The author points out and considers that even the traditional tasks mentioned above can become more flexible and intense over time and cannot be handled through routines. In addition to the exploration of parallel structures of the original trade union field of activity and the area of CSR this information may also guide the further remarks. However, this raises the question of whether reforming forces are even present in the trade union ranks.

Of special relevance for weakening the hypothesis 1 is pointed to the relations and 'thematic intersections' pointed out by Zimpelmann and Wassermann (2012, p. 26). Ver.di also gives the impression of a kinship principle and then expressly refrains from a core issue: 'The topics ... are ... a renaissance of classical topics (...).' Even if 'a real CSR without the participation of employee representatives is inconceivable' and 'classical participation can also be understood as a subset of comprehensive CSR', 'CSR is not a core topic of classical trade union education' (ibid., p. 51). Affirmative in this context is the evaluation of Mutz and Egbringhoff who also refer to the polarities of a structural nature: 'Issues such as compliance with social standards, equal opportunities, health, anti-discrimination, reconciliation of family and work or social commitment are essentially original tasks the unions. From this legitimate negotiation and design claims could be derived' (2006, p. 27).

As a result, despite the conceptual and structural differences, both arenas are related and demonstrate a common trade union functional requirement. Regardless of whether CSR does not stand in the way of traditional tasks, it even inspires them: CSR also brings new tasks or familiar tasks in a new guise. A further scope of hypothesis 1 therefore concerns the examination of whether the tasks within these guidelines exceed union competences and resources and that restraint can be justified. In this context, for example, the training and qualification of union employees themselves plays an important role. Vitols confirms that there is an important and decisive driver for engagement in the debate: 'An important influencing factor is the knowledge of CSR. For example, employee representatives may not generally have the information and skills necessary to solicit sustainability initiatives' (Vitols, 2011, p. 267). Hauser-Ditz and Wilke also assume a direct relationship between sympathy and qualification (Hauser-Ditz & Wilke, 2004, p. 24). Nonetheless, one

could expect unions to be academically positioned not only for routine activities, but also to be able to face unique and challenging tasks in principle, to be able to exercise them and to strive for any new tasks. In the contemporary history of trade union development, the author now concludes that the unions are subject to traditional temptations, but that, overall, they also set a dynamic course. They are able to develop activity rather than simply reacting.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the described deficiencies the authors of the quoted contributions have made scientifically valuable and readable contributions, but these do not substantiate the hypothesis convincing, since CSR already includes traditional task packages, the priority pursuit of traditional tasks identify no indication of lack of skills and resources and unions are already (partially) committed beyond their traditional tasks.

So the author does not recognize the restriction of decisionism by the logic of a traditional task pursuit as a solution, since the two areas - traditional tasks and CSR - obviously have a closer relationship to each other than repeatedly assumed. As a result, the recording is omitted or the hypothesis approach 1 is excluded. For this reason, the author now switches to the next hypothesis, which he examines in the following chapter.

### **Hypothesis 2: Doubts about the Social Substance**

#### **Presentation and Analysis**

Egbringhoff and Mutz made the following assumption based on a broad-based works council survey in 2006:

The unions are so far predominantly sceptical towards CSR .... They doubt that companies are concerned with the social environment or the well-being of employees; rather, they suspect that only economic motives represent the actual driving force .... Trade union representatives point to many negative experiences in the area of environmental protection or equality, but also to inconsistencies, which are obvious when companies despite high profits dismiss employees and at the same time gain a positive image with CSR/CC programs. ... Such concerns are the cause of many years of restraint on the part of the unions (Mutz & Egbringhoff, 2012, p. 280).

They refer in this study to strategies of works councils in large companies dealing with CSR and CC on observations and statements of group works councils. Overall, there is a lack of initiative, with marketing tricks and credibility having a significant impact on the strategic stance: Only in a few cases are works councils proactive and consider CSR and CC a future topic that can be shaped

by their own ideas and contributions. However, CSR and CC initiatives initiated by the works councils are rare. ... The fact that the importance of CSR and CC activities is increasing is well known to many works councils: 'This is becoming more and more important, as many still have to rethink', according to a general works council. .... To find a new role, you look for the own in the stranger. This is always the case when works councils have the impression that it is an 'established' market-oriented PR strategy. ... Then the projects are reflected sceptically and their own participation critically weighed. ... A group works council summarizes this: It is indeed a balancing act: Where does a credible commitment cease and where does the real satire begin? We have not blocked things, we have been very positive, but without being used by the workforce or the publicity (Mutz & Egbringhoff, 2012, p. 28).

A common assumption from the impression of CSR-active companies is that they are not concerned with the benefits but with image reasons. In the debate social issues - in contrast to the other two pillars - play the main role anyway. This weighting represents quite well the unions' tendency, which was found in a 2003 study of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions that suggests that the involvement of employee representatives is lower for example if the topic of the CSR environment is discussed: 'They ... found that worker representative involvement is weaker when it comes to local community and the environment' (Bronchain, 2003, p. 14). With regard to the social aspect, which according to the European Trade Union Confederation survey of 2003 is favoured by the unions in Europe and is particularly postulated to be active in this area, they feared that it would lag behind the other dimensions and fall short of it:

The social dimension is the one favoured by the unions, and the area that needs to be stressed, because it concerns the unions' deepest concerns. Some people believe that social aspects of CSR tend to be neglected or get left by the wayside (Beaujolin, 2004, p. 8).

In fact, there are approaches and constituted ideologies from the past that are specifically uninterested in the interaction of unions and social policies and do not consider their ir-repressible use in this domain compulsory. 'Unions are not "inherently" programmatic social movements—they are much more pragmatically oriented' (Hemmer, 1982, p. 506). In this connection reference is made to the work of Richard Hyman, who distinguishes three trade union identities. One of these identities, called 'business unionism', characterizes the unions as economic actors in the labour market, who primarily want to assert the economic interests of the employees in collective bargaining. This type is widespread especially in the Anglo-Saxon language area (Hyman, 2001, p. 8). Not to be overlooked are lines of connection to the trade

union movement 'Trade-Unionism', which Lenin addressed in 1902, and which he criticized negatively and critically, saying that 'the union-only struggle is the struggle for [the workers] themselves and their children, and not a struggle for any future generations with any future socialism' (Lenin, 1955 [1902], p. 392). There is a conflict of interest, which Hyman (1996) deduces as follows: 'Unions are primarily organizations representing the interests of employed workers, a function that will be undermined if at the same time overarching socio-political goals are pursued, so they must be political Keep out of entanglements (p. 12).

The explanation makes it plausibly clear that the imposed character of union struggle in social matters can be over-zealous. If the CSR phenomenon is seen as a social force field, the commitment of the unions does not have to be a mandatory exercise. But if we return briefly to the origin: even though the unions have lost the 'character of a movement' after the completion of processes of institutionalization and 'attachment', they have originally come from a 'social movement' (Kurz-Scherf & Zeuner, 2001, p. 148). In the DGB statute the interests of the DGB and his members can be clearly read as a task in socio-political matters. This shows that the unions seem to be equipped with more extensive, sufficiently strong and necessary competencies in order to be able to intervene in overlapping areas compared to their well-known minimum competencies. CSR must be understood as a holistic task in terms of social policy which has a cross-cutting function in relation to adjacent areas and calls for far-reaching overlaps with other trade union activities.

Another way to examine the hypothesis critically puts the question of trust in the spotlight. Those who doubt the social promises of the concept play with their credibility. In fact, in recent decades, the credibility of the economy has not made it to the best. The scandals around false balance sheets of the US energy company Enron or the rise and the stock market crash on the new market went around the world at that time. However, if the core problem is distrust, then the behavioural approach, from the author's point of view, is far too short to deliberately move away from the CSR process. This circumstance should lead to more activity, early countermeasures or at least accompanied the process controlled to refute the charge. Hauser-Ditz and Wilke (2004) also recommend this application-related point of view in their study:

If, as observed in some companies, there are doubts about the credibility of the CSR commitment, then workers' representatives can at least offer points of attack to test the seriousness of the projects and to demand concrete measures. It therefore seems important to actively support the CSR process through the employee representatives and to help shape it in the interests of the employees (effective regulatory mechanisms, linked to their own institutions). This

reduces the risk that something is going past the employee representatives and, in the end, actually goes against them (p. 24).

### **Conclusion**

The analysis revealed a number of plausibility arguments which can be summarized as the conclusion that doubts about the social purpose of the concept - whether they are unjustified or justified - can not and must not affect the activity. This is the main criticism of Hypothesis 2, as a proper involvement of social partners in the debate can be expected.

If you look into the soul of the unions, you actually need to arouse desire and there is more evidence for it than against expressing an opinion on this subject. 'Social' is in the CSR-term and takes recourse to self-imposed responsibilities. Unions have emerged from a social movement. It is part of their self-image. The hypothesis, however, according to the author's criticism, misjudges a commitment to action on the part of the unions, which apparently have difficulties in recognising a preventive attitude or even an indispensable competence.

### **Hypothesis 3: Underestimation of Importance and Failure**

#### **Presentation and Analysis**

Testing this hypothesis is guided by the question of whether the unions consciously or unconsciously were blind to the CSR-issue or did not recognised it. In this approach, no scientific insight but the case of an oversimplification of trade union action is reflected, introduced by the opponent. The BDA explains that the DGB and its members almost 'overslept' the issue (Zimpelmann & Wassermann, 2012, p. 38). This general reproach may also be undermined by other passages. It is noteworthy that this accusation is not just the usual criticism of opponents in mind but the approach suggests quite directly, the unions were recklessly withdrawn from the debate. With this hypothesis, a general criticism could rather be linked to the union attitude. From what has been said so far one can quickly get the impression that the unions are not participating in the debate or are participating only because of their symbolic importance since they may find it an annoying additional task. The unions have apparently simply failed to address corporate responsibility as a potential area of influence. This omission would make the impact of other actors acting on CSR leaders, most notably the European Commission, even more effective. However, important aspects are overlooked. Basically, the approach is

guided by the question of whether the unions consciously or unconsciously ‘overslept’ or did not recognize the topic.

If this assertion of the BDA representative was correct to some extent, however, it would be necessary to explain whether the unions had attached too little or no importance to the topic. The representative may find himself off the mark because the state of art is another one: one of the first empirically produced, recognized in science and often cited work on the merged topics CSR and trade unions in Europe is the contribution of Preuss et al. who published in 2006 a first transnational overview of the CSR role of unions. Particularly revealing in this context is that CSR was perceived as a threat in particular. Above all, the great threat arises from the conceptual point of view which could give management more power and scope for decision-making (‘In many cases CSR is perceived as a threat to unions, as it transfers yet more power and discretion to managers’, Preuss et al., 2006, p. 258). This news should have spread like wildfire through the European Union landscape and warned them to be cautious. It is hardly to be assumed, a topic with structured threatening potential, simply too overslept. However, hypothesis 3 may also suggest that unions have completely neglected to tackle the issue. This judgment would be very presumptuous. The approach of a complete omission confronts the facts which show that occasional activities (e.g. participation in the multi-stakeholder forum) and publications (statements, brochures, etc.) are to be found. The impression of a symbolic participation can be understood more in this respect.

A final theoretical test of Hypothesis 3 is judged from an Anglicist point of view which explains its weakening as follows: CSR can initially soberly convey a modern, innovative world and an international dimension by first envisioning the term. This assumption seems to exist if one takes into account that the term is in fact only in circulation in Germany since the 2001 Green Paper. However, CSR not only reads like an innovative concept, it also has corresponding potential. Whether understood as organizational or management innovation, when introduced, change processes drag on through the organization of a business. Innovations can affect the social sphere, for example, the personal adaptation of working hours, the implementation of (environmental) management systems for the purpose of sustainability reporting as well as technological environmentally friendly changes in the production process with the goal of ‘resource efficiency’ (Gelbmann et al., 2013, p. 41). Innovations are substantial for companies, especially in industry. The corporate world is challenged by new developments and mostly prepared for new innovations. Innovative topics are not leaving their mark on the unions either. They are usually not overslept but tend not wanted if the risks seem too large or incalculable for instance the need for change for existing technologies and related massive changes in the established

value chain. It would not be presumptuous to assume that representatives have a general influence on innovation introductions and therefore a reason for interest.

### **Conclusion**

There is no accurate proof that could support Hypothesis 3. The BDA representative drew the conclusion from the restraint of the unions that they had misjudged the signs or had not recognised them at all. The findings from the technical literature available and the author’s own assessments do not confirm this hypothesis. The accusation is therefore unfounded: there is no evidence to support this attitude. The author is ultimately concerned that any behaviour is not unfounded and is not a coincidence. Every conscientious and sensitive interest group (including trade unions) is fundamentally concerned with tackling any matter that has any bearing on its remit. Worrying issues and developments are generally addressed and not negated. Occasional activities contradict general union inactivity. Apart from that innovative topics always stimulate curiosity and activity.

### **Critical Appreciation, Conclusion and Transition into an Own Explanatory Approach**

The hypothetical explanatory approaches are based on assumptions, in which a number of deficiencies could be noted. Overall, it is noticeable that all previous approaches are based on rather one-sided and one-dimensional ideas that are analytically negligible and can be reduced to a small number of attributes. All previous approaches do not or hardly discuss the political framework, they find their limit(s) there.

An abstract logical conclusion might be that the unions’ behaviour - relatively simply assumed - was illuminated only in terms of their basic characteristics. The previous work has therefore left open questions and flanks that need to be deepened. A short insight will be given here.

The previous findings and analytical results of this work do not adequately take into account the economic significance of unions in the debate and what position they take and for which reason. Impulses for dealing with this issue give for instance Zimpelmann and Wassermann (2012, p. 57). They have provided impulses from which to find own interpretations and ideas which are important for a politically oriented model of thought: ‘Looking at the many political and practical challenges in the “Global Village” ... makes unions’ caution ... understandable.’ The high international relevance of the topic requires political attention because situations arise that bring great challenges for German policy. Into this

opinion is to penetrate further, because it is in the opinion of the author to choose a more comprehensive approach or an all-round view than previously worked on in the literature since the union decision-making behaviour contextually has to take into account various stakeholder interests.

Mutz and Egbringhoff (2006) pointed out the feature of the dynamic constellations in the CSR landscape:

‘If one asks about the benefits or advantages and disadvantages ... for the employees, one often only sees the individual measures or projects and thus only isolated facets, we have been able to work out that ... it is a multi-layered field in which contradictory constellations of interests and ambivalent implications arise in some cases, and that therefore the view of the whole would be desirable’ (p. 171).

We are dealing with different interests which can only be solved together, on the one hand, and which have to be contextualised together, on the other.

‘A ... CSR/CC understanding could aim to combine problems and new demands in the world of work and life with a civil society perspective. The processes of dissolution of boundaries on which this connection is based make it possible ... for different concerns to be mutually acknowledged. This recognition could result in fruitful cooperation between different stakeholder groups’ (p. 175).

Nevertheless, there are isolated activities and projects in which unions are also active at the international level. In this context, they have joined a current campaign in Germany in favour of a supply chain law to curb the violation of human rights by multinational corporations. German companies would not sufficiently meet their responsibilities. Again and again there are reports of child labour, destroyed rainforests and environmental destruction. The federal government should create a legal framework so that corporations can be held liable (Germanwatch, 2019).

Problems that go beyond this and internationalisation are often ignored in theory and practice. The conclusion of the following quotation from Vitols will also prove to be a very important contribution to this work, as it is important for the author’s own explanatory model. Vitols summarised some highlights from an event of the Council for Sustainable Development’s Multistakeholder Forum held in 2007:

‘The view that employee representatives are reluctant to find their role in the area of sustainability was, for example, represented at a multi-stakeholder forum of the Council for Sustainable Development. Some participants in the forum assumed that unions would have difficulties in positioning and positioning themselves in the sustainability discourse because, on the one hand, they have different core issues

and competences than those that are given high priority in CSR. In the opinion of the relevant actors, these include in particular issues in the value chain or ecological issues such as climate protection. On the other hand, the unions would have difficulties in opening up to international debates on sustainability due to their national organisational structure’ (Vitols, 2011, p. 12).

This quotation also suggests that positioning in the global market is difficult and is usually described from the usual perspective, which reaches national borders. In this respect, it is precisely here that the problem and the claim seem to exist at the same time, which are in need of explanation.

Unions need to look at two aspects: looking at their organizational and external challenges. At the centre of this analysis the CSR market conditions and the motives of affiliated unions emerge. Unions need to look at two things when positioning their responsibilities: the corporate side and in their own or, more precisely, in their organization. These two points of view must be taken into account that show that the unions are faced with a dilemma in the decision-making process. On the one hand CSR is no longer completely voluntary. On the other hand, the umbrella organization DGB has difficulties responding to all its members. These two aspects are at the forefront of the problems.

CSR seems to have upset the economy, the unions as well. They cannot prove a clear role since CSR represents an impressive conglomeration of interests and within these interconnections a concrete positioning is difficult. The insecurity behind it can be seen as a two-component mixture: the coordination of the rather heterogeneous interests of the individual union clientele is a difficult challenge. Their function as a system support does not allow a radical confrontation with the social partners since disadvantageous consequences for the enterprises can fall back on them and their clientele. These considerations and premises need to be substantiated in a detailed investigation.

## Summary of Results and Conclusion

A dedicated study of the decisionistic-restricted involvement of unions in the CSR context has entered relatively unexplored territory with regard to its causes. Some premature assumptions have already been written. It is hardly surprising that this attitude spread like wildfire in the debate in a very short space of time. What the material examined has in common is that employee representatives are shown to be in a predominantly defensive position. Essential examples of their assumptions have been taken up in the present work and formed the starting point of the scientific investigation.

The unions are known as an organisation that signals a willingness to struggle: a quality that was put to the test when they came into contact with CSR. Consequently, it was important in the study to trace the reasons for their passivity. And because the author's approach to the subject also includes the analysis of traditional patterns of the German union movement, few historical aspects were also recalled which the author considered important for a fundamental explanation of the union policy orientation. In addition to the essential characteristics, the author has identified other characteristics that are important for strategic behaviour. Their CSR positioning consistently shows that a critical-sceptical attitude is appropriate.

The exemplary answers found to the research question were presented as hypotheses, based on the behavioural findings in the literature. The hypothesis model was analysed, evaluated, partially dismantled and critically appreciated. The explanatory power of the three approaches was different. What is striking is that the causes cited in the literature, which led to the hypotheses, all disregard the ambivalent constellations of interests of the unions and thus could not provide any relevant results on the author's explanatory approach. The study was intended to substantiate the finding that the unions had legitimate reasons to refrain from radical enforcement in the debate.

By bringing together the decentralised analytical results of this work, a central picture can be inferred and a covert attitude discovered that significantly distances itself from the type of confrontational union. However, a hard fact emerged from the soft engagement. The author's observations have provided sufficient evidence to suggest that there is a different core behind the decisionistic-restricted behaviour than would normally be assumed. The study has provided a picture of a union strategy in dealing with CSR that is incompatible with the widespread perception of the public and counterparts. For this reason, we should always be warned against premature false conclusions. With their demands, CSR has given economy and politics an explosive debate. One characteristic of this debate was the resulting demands on companies, which were argued by economy set too high. The unions occasionally countered the reservations of companies and their associations with references to a quasi legal claim to CSR, but largely left it up to the formulation of demands. And the strict and demanding tone it contains can therefore only be conveyed symbolically in order to consider the underlying goals of the CSR concept to be meaningful. Although the current CSR framework is not shaped by legal provisions, it tends to have unpredictable effects at the expense of companies as a result of quasi-obligatory requirements. As a result, it is not surprising that unions are so restrictive in their decision-making that they have for a long time neglected CSR issues.

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## Sindikati in decizionistično omejena vpletenost v CSR razpravo – razlaga s sodelovalnim pristopom

### Izvleček

Korporacijska družbena odgovornost (CSR) narekuje odgovornost podjetij za trajnostno upravljanje na ekonomskem, ekološkem in družbenem področju. Večina znanstvenih del in raziskav o CSR je bila napisana primarno z osredotočanjem na etiko (moralno vs. tržno gospodarstvo), nosilca odgovornosti (država vs. podjetja) in upravljanje (npr. najboljša praksa, priročniki). Ta članek uporabi drugačen pogled, in sicer pogled skupine udeležencev, ki se jo stalno omenja, vendar dobiva nezadostno pozornost – sindikati. Predhodna raziskava je pokazala, da so bili sindikati v ozadju evropske CSR-razprave, odkar se je leta 2001 pričela. Na osnovi primera nemških sindikatov avtor tega članka s študijem izjav članov sindikata analizira njihovo motivacijo. Sistematičen pregled literature zagotavlja osnovo za kvalitativno vsebinsko analizo smiselnih motivov. Rezultati kažejo, da se sindikati soočajo z zapletenim okoljem z raznolikimi interesi, v katerem se težko pozicionirajo. Nadalje so se obravnavale zahteve do podjetij glede CSR na ekonomskem področju kot zelo visoke. Čeprav CSR ne vodijo pravna določila, razkriva polzavezujoča pravila. Iz teh razlogov ni presenečenje, da so bili sindikati skeptični in restriktivni. Študija z analizo obrambne CSR-strategije prispeva k napredku na področju vključevanja v mednarodne razprave. Avtor se na teoretično konceptualen način ukvarja z obstoječimi raziskovalnimi rezultati na tem področju, jih izpodbija in predstavlja svoj lasten poskus razlage. Njegov razlagalni pristop razširja obstoječe razlagalne vzorce z novimi pogledi na opisani problem.

**Ključne besede:** korporacijska družbena odgovornost, sindikati, industrijska razmerja, CSR razprava v EU, CSR akterji