

# The management of corporate social responsibility through projects: A more economically developed country perspective

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## Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an increasingly influential concept, claimed to be implemented more in the West than in the Gulf Cooperation Community (GCC) and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where CSR is often portrayed as less developed and mainly philanthropic. The research reported in this paper investigates capacity building for CSR in organizations and examines the research question as to whether the project management of CSR can contribute to increasing levels of awareness, engagement, and implementation. The empirical study therefore examines the management of CSR through projects and consists of data analysed from 29 interviews conducted during 2011–2016 with CSR representatives for organizations operating in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is a member of the GCC, located in the MENA region, and categorized as a more economically developed country. The findings reveal evidence supporting the argument that organizations with capabilities in the project management of CSR are in the position to develop capacities for strategic CSR. This empirical analysis of CSR capacity development across varying degrees of sophistication in the project management of CSR activities implies a more developed stage of CSR engagement, at least in the sample of organizations studied, than is expressed in the extant literature on CSR in the UAE, and elsewhere in the MENA region. The use of project management to organize, implement, align, and monitor CSR activity supports capacity development in CSR and can contribute to its sustainability. We recommend that future research examines the political, business, and institutional factors that could further develop CSR in organizations when managed through projects.

## KEYWORDS

corporate social responsibility (CSR), CSR projects, project management

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is acknowledged by many organizations across the world (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007; Juholin, 2004; Lindgreen, Swaen, & Campbell, 2009; Papasolomou-Doukakis, Krambia-Kapardis, & Katsiolouides, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, CSR is portrayed as mainly philanthropic in practice and unstructured, implying that it is ill managed (Katsiolouides & Brodtkorb, 2007; Jamali & Neville, 2011). The study aims to utilize project management concepts to explore how CSR is managed by some organizations through projects in one country in the MENA region, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Our main research question is “How can project management contribute to increasing levels of awareness, engagement and implementation of CSR?” The significance of this research is that it provides insight on CSR and its development in a country in the MENA region, which is considered to be a combination of underdeveloped, developing, and more developed countries.

## 2 | CSR THEORY AND PRACTICE IN MENA COUNTRIES

CSR has been examined by academics since the 1950s (Bowen, 1953), and different terms have been used over time to describe it ranging from CSR, to corporate responsibility, corporate governance, and more recently, sustainability or shared value. O’Riordan and Fairbrass (2008) comment on the pressure that organizations face to address issues of CSR noting that most businesses ultimately aim to generate profits but depend on society for their existence. Over recent years, many organizations have come under increasing influence from government and public opinion expecting them to engage in CSR. Despite processes of globalization and the growth in popularity of CSR, academic researchers argue that MENA countries have not yet reached a similar level of practice in CSR as have western countries. Jamali and Neville (2011, p. 601) propose that “CSR in developing economies has been ... less embedded in corporate strategies, and less politically rooted than in most high income countries.” Likewise, Jamali et al. (2009, p. 173) conclude that CSR in the region is varied “between the classical perspective which considers CSR as a burden on competitiveness and the modern perspective that views CSR as instrumental for business success.” In contrast to Western countries, it has been claimed that CSR in Africa and the Middle East is more philanthropic and “culturally embedded” (Jamali et al., 2009). Notwithstanding the lower level of practice of CSR in many countries in the Gulf Cooperation Community and MENA regions that is claimed in the literature, Jamali et al. (2009, p. 189) concluded “... while some managers ... still adhere to the perspective that ‘the business of business is business,’ there seems to be a larger proportion of managers in the Middle Eastern context that see an added value from CSR ....”

The literature suggests that CSR exists in the UAE, but it is not clearly understood and this country is closer to a more economically developed country (MEDC) than a developing country setting. For

example, Robertson (2009, p. 617) states that although U.S. and U.K. models of CSR are relatively well defined and understood, its definition, scope, and activities in other countries require examination. To a significant extent, CSR is context-specific and CSR planning and implementation should be modified according to different national and regional, political, and economic conditions (Bhattacharyya, 2019, p. 52).

Even though CSR in the Middle East has been argued to be largely philanthropic (Jamali & Neville, 2011; Katsiolouides & Brodtkorb, 2007), the value of CSR is recognized. CSR’s value was demonstrated in a research study on Dubai, UAE, conducted by Rettab et al. (2009, p. 384) who found a positive association between CSR and financial performance, interestingly, the reverse of what they had predicted. This main empirical finding is similar to Western developed economies. Similarly, a study on the banking industry conducted by Al-Tamimi and Hussein (2014, p. 106) found that banks in the UAE are aware of the concept and are becoming more active in adopting CSR as a means of giving back to local communities and the country. An increasing amount of evidence for a positive association between CSR adoption and financial performance is reported in research studies on West and East Asia. Recently, for example, in the context of Taiwan, Hou (2018, p. 26) reported that firms implementing CSR obtained higher quality tangible and intangible resources, increasing their organizations’ reputation in the markets and within social communities.

The potential of strategic CSR compared with more ad hoc forms of CSR has been debated in the literature for at least two decades. Porter and Kramer (2002, p. 59) argued 15 years ago that “It is only where corporate expenditures produce simultaneous social and economic gains that corporate philanthropy and shareholder interests converge.” In the areas of CSR and sustainability, some successful firms have in recent years adopted CSR to benefit society and enhance competitive advantage (Song, Ren, & Yu, 2018, p. 88). In this regard, Bhattacharyya et al., (2008, p. 267) claim that strategic CSR is the appropriate way of avoiding some of the problems associated with traditional practices in CSR. Given this mixed empirical picture of philanthropy, CSR, and strategic CSR, it is therefore important to explore more deeply how CSR is understood and managed in Gulf Cooperation Community and MENA countries as well as elsewhere.

## 3 | THE IMPORTANCE OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN CSR

The literature on CSR reports a general trend of increasing adoption by organizations, alongside continuing constraints and difficulties with implementation. Pedersen (2006, p. 137) analysed some of the difficulties of operationalization viewed from the perspective of stakeholder theory. Other authors such as Sachs, Maurer, Rühli, and Hoffmann (2006) have similarly examined operationalization of CSR in relation to stakeholder theory, but they do not attend to the ways that project management systems could assist with the engagement and collaboration of stakeholders. Whereas these and other authors

do not focus on project management as a tool to operationalize CSR, nonetheless they do refer to the CSR activity which was successfully implemented in the cases they discussed as CSR projects. This is significant to our research as it further highlights the role of project management in formalizing and developing CSR activity in organizations and addressing the socio-economic elements of CSR. For example, Pederesen (2006, p. 146) presents two projects, the “purchasing with decency” project and the “genius” project, which are examples of dealing with formal and informal stakeholder communications, essential to any CSR activity. Similarly, Sachs et al. (2006, p. 507) draw attention to how “... CSR projects are aimed to provide society (respectively concerned stakeholders) an added-value via cooperation with non-governmental organizations, public authorities, and other institutions.” Therefore, in order to operationalize CSR activity successfully, it is worth examining its implementation from project management perspectives.

CSR is dynamic and can be managed differently in projects. It is thus worth analyzing in more depth how project management might facilitate achieving CSR goals and do so in ways that are strategic for organizations (Wall, 2008). Project management involves successfully implementing a project through managing tools, knowledge, and skills (Mir & Pinnington, 2014; Shenhar & Wideman, 2002). To illustrate the role that project management can play in CSR management, Salazar et al. (2012, p. 175) recommend “CSR activities need to be managed and measured as projects and aggregated to the business or corporate level ...”. This association was made over 20 years ago and is mentioned in Burke and Logsdon (1996) who advocated CSR in the form of programmes of projects. Salazar et al. (2012, p. 182) investigate projects for managing CSR including measuring and monitoring it. In relation to measuring social outcomes, they propose that “... measurement needs to take place at the project level and incorporate measures that actually reflect social outcomes, rather than activities undertaken by the organization.” Project management therefore presents means of managing CSR activities and operations within organizations in ways that are potentially more productive than informal methods.

Moreover, CSR is recognized as a means of establishing important values that contribute to reputation, credibility, potential to reduce operational risks, and save costs as it promotes values, motivates employees, and helps to retain them (Weber, 2008). According to Schieg (2009), project management can be effective in organizing and implementing CSR activity consistent with operational goals. In addition, given the growing global pressure for sustainable management, it is important that the environmental issues in projects are addressed so organizations' brand image, reputation, accountability, reliability, and trustworthiness are not unnecessarily risked or compromised (Schieg, 2009).

Project management could become of increasing importance for CSR and its specialist practitioners, especially in the implementation of strategic CSR activities. In realizing this opportunity, Pellegrinelli (2002, p. 229) claims that best practice has concentrated on “... marshalling of projects and resources to achieve the desired strategic and/or synergy benefits.” In adopting CSR, it is becoming more widely acknowledged that philanthropic CSR is no longer sufficient, and

increasingly, managers are considering strategic forms of CSR that will serve the organization and the community. The project management of CSR can help to keep CSR aligned with organizational goals and strategies. Too and Weaver (2014, p. 1384) claim that “Project management techniques have frequently been applied to the tasks of planning and implementing necessary operational changes.” These authors add that projects contribute to the achievement of strategic goals and that leaders are increasingly employing projects to achieve corporate strategy.

Improved alignment of CSR with organizational strategy is identified by researchers as an area where project management should be applied to increase its effectiveness (Lycett, Rassau, & Danson, 2004). These authors argue that delivery of projects can be designed effectively to achieve organizational strategy and that project management is essential to maintain and expand the business. Too and Weaver (2004, p. 1390) also assert that projects can deliver the change required to achieve the organization's strategic and tactical goals.

The costs and financial risks related to the implementation of CSR are often a significant concern facing senior managers (Young & Makhija, 2014). Criteria such as economic return and cost/benefit analysis are relevant and applicable to CSR projects where the costs associated with the project usually have an impact on whether it is implemented or not (de Carvalho, Patah, & de Souza Bido, 2015). As Gardiner (2005, p. 4) explains, “In a cost-conscious society, projects are seen as a means of increasing control over scarce resources. Many companies are adopting a ‘management by projects’ approach to conducting business as a way of shortening product development times, lowering costs, and increasing quality, reliability and profit margins.” Similarly, Battaglia et al. (2010, pp. 134) draw attention to the prevalence of informal CSR in Small and Medium size Enterprises (SMEs) because they usually lack the necessary resources to implement more formal policies due to issues of cost and operational complexity. Therefore, use of project management methods for implementing CSR could alleviate some of the management obstacles, subsequently contributing to SMEs' capacity development and integration of CSR with their companies' goals.

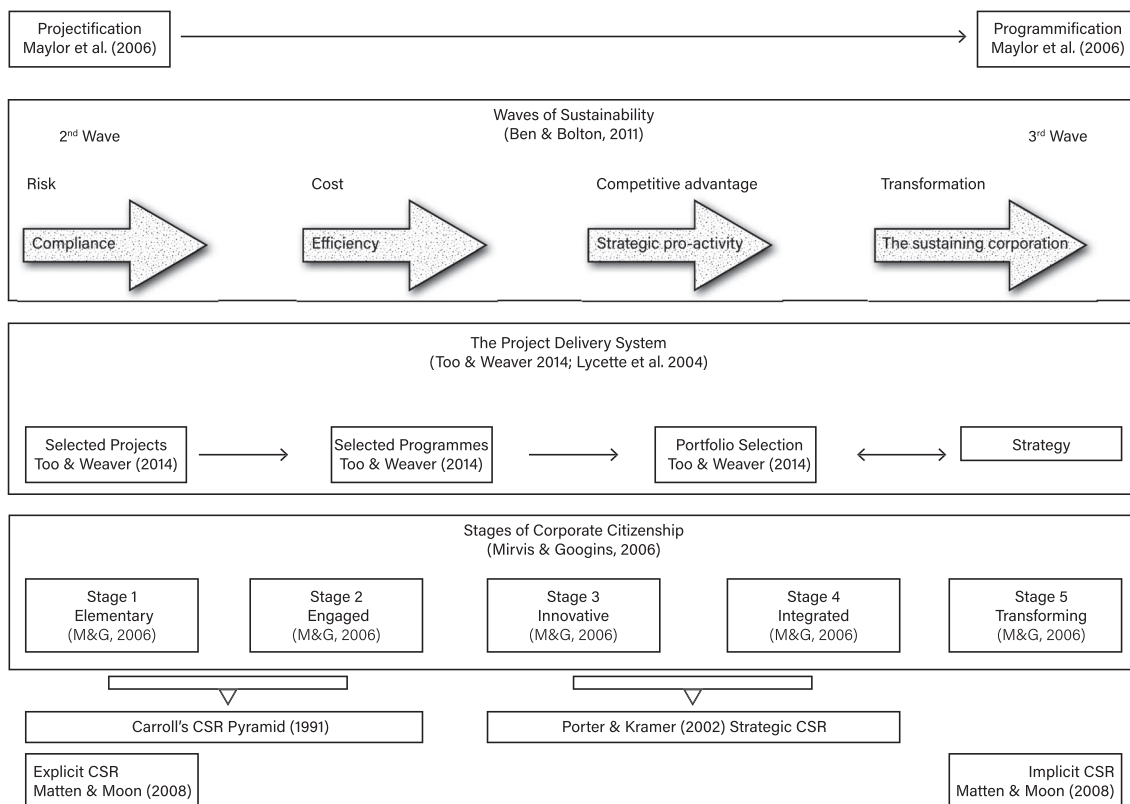
Key areas of project management have been identified by the Project Management Institute (PMI, 2014) that include “Integration, Cost, Human resources, Stakeholder management, Scope, Quality, Time, Communications, Procurement, and Risk management.” Schieg (2009) also identifies similar areas such as employees, social values, suppliers and contractors, and customers. These areas are all important in project management and may function more effectively through application of CSR (Akpınar, Kömürçü, Kankal, Özölçer, & Kaygusuz, 2008). Project management and CSR are therefore considered to share mutual dependencies in relation to strategic alignment as well as reciprocal benefits deriving from their combined management implementation. Schieg (2009) advocates that CSR is now integral to project organizations, many objectives and project milestones are related to CSR elements, making the CSR concept worth considering and including in the management of projects in addition to using project management to run CSR activities.

Taking our line of argument one step further in terms of building capacity in organizations, the application of CSR could motivate project managers to consider multiple aspects of a project, responsibly. Project managers tend to focus on project pressures in the form of deadlines, costs, and technicalities related to quality, and so other issues might be overlooked. Elements of CSR are highly valuable to any organization but may be even more so to projects where reduction in costs and risks are significant management considerations. Furthermore, Forcadell and Aracil (2019, p. 1) refer to the application of CSR as a capacity building driver not only through projects and organizations, but economies as a whole. These authors argue that because many emerging countries have comparatively weak institutions and regulatory environments, multinational companies have an important role to play in developing CSR in these economies. Many multinational companies have developed systems and competencies in managing projects. Review of the project management literature reveals that there are links in both directions between the fields of project management and CSR. Given that project management can assist the implementation of CSR, and vice versa, CSR can benefit the value of project management activities, we therefore developed a framework combining the elements of project management and the levels of CSR. This framework is informed by ideas from CSR and strategic management (Benn & Bolton, 2011; Carroll, 1991; Matten & Moon, 2008; Mirvis & Googins, 2006; Porter & Kramer, 2002, 2006), and project management (Lycett et al., 2004; Maylor, Brady, Cooke-Davies, & Hodgson, 2006; Too & Weaver, 2014). These ideas are represented in Figure 1 and explained in more detail below.

The framework developed in Figure 1 presents capacity development in CSR and project management, incorporating increasing levels of sophistication of conceptualization and efficacy of implementation. As the pyramid is built up, the CSR responsibilities and management activities become more complex. Similarly, as the stages of corporate citizenship become more complex from left to right, the level of engagement in CSR increases.

A cross-comparison of CSR theories with the stages of corporate citizenship by Mirvis and Googins (2006) illustrates how CSR is shaped by organizational nature, values, culture, and leadership, amongst other factors. There is substantial continuity over time in several of the major dimensions of CSR models and frameworks. The stages presented by Mirvis and Googins (2006) actually correspond to ideas presented earlier by Carroll (1991), in the sense that the first two stages of their model reflect upon the economic and legal bases of Carroll's CSR pyramid (1991).

It can be seen in the proposed model (see Figure 1 above) that the innovative and integrated stages bear some similarities with the strategic CSR theory advanced by Porter and Kramer (2006). These more complex stages involve "organizational alignment" and the "business case" for CSR, which are pillars in the theory presented by Porter and Kramer (2006). The implicit and explicit CSR theory by Matten and Moon (2008) incorporates reflective stages in the model. For example, "implicit" CSR would exist at all levels. It indicates a complex and high level of CSR engagement when CSR is present by default and is not purposely forced into existence by an organization, thus incorporating CSR practice at a new level of self-awareness and sophistication.



**FIGURE 1** Project and programme managing corporate social responsibility (CSR) development (author's own origination)

The project management dimension is also included in the framework, showing how project and programme levels of CSR activity reflect varying levels of CSR engagement and complexity, as shown in the theoretical models of CSR selected in Figure 1. The project level is expected to reflect less CSR engagement and a more philanthropic nature of CSR activity, whereas programmes are expected to display more complex CSR and multiple-project activity on a larger scale. The proposed framework is intended to show how managing and evaluating CSR from project and programme levels assist in understanding how CSR is implemented and why it is managed through a particular approach.

Van Heel and Muir (2006) stress that CSR and sustainability initiatives need to be managed to be successful or they risk failing to deliver the business and social benefits they were designed to achieve. CSR activities can be line managed and project managed to achieve the benefits and purpose of CSR. Jonker and de Witte (2006) identify the integration of CSR into the business as a challenge. To illustrate the role that project management could play in CSR management, Salazar et al. (2012, p. 175) recommend managing CSR activity and incorporating it at a high level. The idea of managing CSR projects is present in the CSR literature, and project management gives various alternatives and methods of managing CSR activities and operations within any organization.

The framework illustrates the linkages between project management and CSR. It shows how project management processes can be used to advance the development of CSR. It is potentially a useful tool to benchmark organizations. The more advanced an organization is with its CSR activity, the more "programmification," as labelled by Maylor et al. (2006), occurs. The project management lifecycle advocated by Lycett et al. (2004) is included for its practicality and applicability to CSR. It consists of four stages of programme management as follows: identification, planning, delivery, and closure. For example, "Stage 3, programme planning," is applicable to CSR activity because much of the available literature emphasizes the importance of monitoring CSR projects and programmes to ensure they are in line with strategy and deliver during project execution. "Stage 1, programme identification," is likewise relevant to the CSR activity because vision is needed when a project or programme is initiated. The project delivery system by Too and Weaver (2014) is critical to this framework as it shows project and programme management of CSR should be "to and from" strategy. As organizations develop their involvement in CSR, their selected projects will expand into programmes of projects which are part of the portfolio selection which is linked to strategy. This transition is correlated with the stages of corporate citizenship developed by Mirvis and Googins (2006) as well as Benn and Bolton's (2011) waves of sustainability model. Therefore, as CSR develops and becomes more managed through projects, initiatives can expand into programmes of projects that, when strategic, are more capable of being transforming to both society and organizations.

In summary, the CSR, project management, organizational, and institutional theories informing the proposed framework in Figure 1 illustrate a progressive, developmental outlook on the project management of CSR. The strategic CSR literature provides evidence that CSR

can be adopted in a more efficient way that is both economically and socially more responsible. In turn, the project management concepts provide established project methodologies for managing CSR through projects for effective implementation and success. Project management is a well understood means of management to align CSR with organizational strategy to achieve organizational goals (Brent & Labuschagne, 2006; Labuschagne & Brent, 2005). The assumption behind the theories examined is that CSR and project management can be combined to not only improve organizations' strategic management but also to serve the good of society and the community. Thus, including CSR in project management (as is argued in the Project Management Body of Knowledge, PMBOK guide) prepares organizations for risks and difficulties related to the environment, health and safety, and sustainability. Furthermore, taking a project-orientated approach to CSR can serve to align and deliver the strategic aspects of CSR more effectively.

Our proposed framework emphasizes the simultaneous development of CSR capacity and project management competence. CSR has been associated with capacity building across a range of literatures, and in some subject disciplines, it is viewed as a vehicle for capacity building in communities and companies. Over 10 years ago, Rajak (2006) observed that transnational corporations have progressed away from CSR as philanthropy on towards concepts of capacity building and social investment. Rajak (2006, p. 194) describes capacity building as "... capacity development entails identifying the entities in which capacity is being developed, the purpose for which capacity is being developed, and the impact of capacity development in one entity on other stakeholders." Rajak claims that CSR programmes need to identify and develop capacities at four levels, which are individuals, organizations, collaborations (networks) and the larger enabling environment (especially the institutional arrangements).

Several authors have considered different ways of employing CSR for capacity building, for example, Idemudia (2011, p. 8) suggests that instead of focusing on a holistic concept of "development" or "CSR," a greater emphasis should be placed on aspects amenable to quantitative or qualitative measurements. In contexts of grand challenges such as poverty reduction and community empowerment, Idemudia argues in favour of a strategic approach to CSR that is measured based on outcomes such as progress in capacity building. Other authors such as Chapple and Moon (2007) conclude from research on CEOs in Asia that capacity building and development in CSR is more prevalent and considered more practical to achieve than are other benefits. Variation and country differences in CSR policies and practices will often relate to country differences, for example, in sustainable marketing, the country of origin branding strategies need to be distinctive to support global competitiveness (Chandra, Sharma, & Kant, 2019). Ward, Wilson, and Zarsky (2007) propose a variety of different ways of building capacity through CSR including working within public policy and regulatory institutions, to release more resources, and leverage them through partnership and collaboration. Likewise, considering individual, organizational, and collaborative levels of action, Rama, Milano, Salas, and Liu (2009) argue that capacity development for collective, institutional change requires developing capability in assessing and executing different options for CSR responses, investments, and impacts on stakeholders.

Torres, Jain, and Leka (2018) emphasize how these options should vary according to the extent that the CSR is proactive or compliance-based. Proactive strategies will tend to be more focused than compliance strategies on building increased capabilities and transforming the environment. In the next section, we describe the research methodology used for exploring the project management of CSR in organizations operating in one example of an MEDC economy, the UAE.

## 4 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 | Case background

The UAE is a rapidly developing country where many business operations and activities, whether or not CSR, are treated as projects. The high use of projects in the UAE provides an opportunity for understanding CSR and organizational change through projects (Pellegrinelli, 2002). The UAE was founded in 1971, it is a constitutional federation, comprising of seven emirates (cities) as follows: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah. The capital of the UAE is Abu Dhabi, which is one of the most recognized emirates along with Dubai, has evolved to become an international hub for business and tourism (United Arab Emirates Government, 2019).

Despite geographically being located in a region that is labelled as predominantly “developing,” the UAE seems to have many characteristics that resemble developed rather than developing countries. Amongst these factors are the highly developed infrastructure, education, and health systems and high GDP growth. Bley and Kuehn (2004, p. 1) state “The United Arab Emirates (UAE) enjoys the highest economic growth rates in the Arab world, with emirate of Dubai’s 6.2 percent GDP growth in 2003 taking the first place among the seven emirates of the UAE. The average GDP growth was an impressive 4.6 percent over the last ten years.” Overall, the UAE is rated a very low risk country. Moreover, the UAE seems to be more advanced than its neighbouring countries, in the sense that it has a more stable and developed economy than what is associated with developing countries (World Bank, 2018) than what is associated with developing countries (see: World Bank Publication October 3, 2018, United Arab Emirates: Economic Outlook - October 2018 [www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/uae-economic-outlook-october-20182003](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/uae-economic-outlook-october-20182003)). Godwin (2006, p. 4) states “The UAE is classified by the World Bank and the United Nations as a developing country with a high income; which refers to the personal income level of UAE citizens.” And that, “The overall economic outlook for the UAE is for continued growth with faster development than any other major Gulf State.” Based on these reviews, and the overall outlook on the UAE, it is more appropriately described as a “MEDC.”

### 4.2 | Sample and methods

To explore the condition of CSR in the UAE, there is a need to understand how it is perceived and managed by organizations, and so the qualitative methodological approach was adopted in this exploratory

study of the project management of CSR. As the research aims to explore CSR from different perspectives, qualitative methods have the capacity to gather rich data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To collect the data, 29 UAE-based organizations involved in CSR were selected. These organizations operate in a range of industries and sectors from public, private, and non-profit organizations including, retail, construction, technology, and non-governmental organizations. The case studies are a combination of thematic and exploratory research investigation. The data analysis identifies themes similar to the literature as well as explores emergent understandings and project management of CSR projects. The interviews are treated as a set of individual cases within one overall case study on CSR in the UAE. A cross-case synthesis technique proposed by Yin (2014) was applied to the multiple case studies to help identify patterns and generate theory.

The case selection for this empirical study is based on CSR and project management activity in organizations. A range of organizations were included from different sectors including real estate, finance and banking, retail professional services, and oil and gas. The cases were selected based on their CSR activity reported in the media and professional networks (e.g., UN Global Compact, Pearl Initiative) as well as in some cases, snowball sampling where one participant would further recommend other organizations to include in the study. The cases were selected to include a range of sectors across private, semigovernment, and non-governmental organizations that are involved in CSR activity.

A diversity of informal and formal CSR activities were examined through nonproject CSR initiatives, project-managed CSR activity, and formal CSR programmes including multiple projects. The degree of capacity in CSR initiatives and the variety of project activities is specific to each organization's culture, management systems, and strategy (Duarte, 2010). The interviews included questions on CSR lasted for 40–60 min, and data were collected on CSR definition, strategy, implementation, challenges, and failures. The length of these interviews was partly due to the fact that our participants had many ideas and a large amount of information that they wanted to convey on CSR in their organizations, but probably also the duration was increased by the researchers prompting and probing on issues of project management as well as CSR.

The collected data from the CSR interviews were analysed using thematic analysis and the grounded theory approach because it aims to “generate or discover a theory” (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is suitable for the exploratory nature of this study. In particular, the interpretive case study approach is used, as it seems highly relevant to this research aiming to generate insight on CSR in the UAE. Individuals and their organizations can be anticipated to interpret CSR in different subjective ways and according to varied intersubjective meanings (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991).

The data were further analysed with the aid of NVIVO software. In summary, in the first step, the transcripts were thoroughly read and open coded; this process of analysis consisted of creating as many codes as were thought relevant to the research question. The second step undertaken in grounded theory analysis is selective coding based on categories identified after open coding. Theoretical coding was the final step in this grounded analysis and involved creating theoretical

categories out of the open and selective codes emerging from the data.

NVIVO software assists the researcher with creating “nodes” and descriptions during processes of open coding, which represent the raw data in a reduced form. Each of the 29 interviews were carefully read and coded by the author consistent with Flick’s (2014) recommendation that open coding should result in a list of categories and codes relating to the text. The initial coding is the first step that leads on to further categorizing and classification of the codes and the data. NVIVO assists the researcher with the identification and comparison of associations between the different codes and sources of data. A total of 223 open codes were created in relation to the data from the interviews.

After open coding all of the interviews, selective coding (also known as “focused coding”) was employed to further classify and develop the codes into more general concepts. Flick (2014, p. 408) states “This step elaborates the development and integration of it in comparison to other groups and focuses on potential core concepts or core variables.” The ultimate aim of selective coding is to achieve core categories through further processes of data reduction, analysis, and interpretation. This involves reorganizing and categorizing the open codes into selective categories based on analysis of the codes and the data. NVIVO offers a range of hierarchical and associative tools for creating new representations of the data so that fragmented and linked ideas and data can be conceptualized to create new forms of representation and theories.

Arriving at the central categories or themes is frequently the result of an arduous, iterative process of analysis for qualitative researchers: “the core category might emerge from among the categories already identified, or one might find that another more abstract term is needed in order to explain the main phenomenon” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 144). These authors also highlight the importance of diagramming for “integration of categories.” Diagramming was employed in the process of selective coding and is useful for initiating and informing the next stage of analysis: the creation of theoretical categories.

Theoretical coding is the final step in analysis and interpretation and involves creating theoretical categories from the selective codes stemming from the data. This step further elaborates on selective coding and enables the grouping of selective codes into theoretical categories as needed. Kan and Parry (2004, p. 473) describe the process of theoretical coding as involving conceptualization of categories and relationships between them, leading eventually to a core category or main theme and comprising a dense, rich theory.

## 5 | DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, the selective codes built from the data include CSR issues, CSR strategy, Education, Global CSR, Government, Implementing CSR, Leadership, and Project Management. These eight selective codes represent the more salient concepts constructed from

coding the data. Every selective code groups the previously open-coded categories to form the major concepts (Table 1).

The categorizing of the theoretical codes resulted in four categories in total. These include Nature of CSR, CSR in the MENA, Putting CSR into Practice code, and Project Managing CSR. These categories were analysed using thematic analysis to further compare our findings with ideas from the literature review on CSR and its project management. The categories were also then visualized using diagrams to illustrate further the findings analysed from the data, this provided a helpful way to view, summarize, and interpret the results. Hence, each theoretical category was drawn up against a qualitative summary diagram, this resembles a visual diagram that includes both codes that have been characterized under each category. For example, the “Putting CSR into Practice” diagram, includes the two codes identified from the findings to influence CSR practice, in this case, Government/Industry relationships and Leadership. The diagram includes these two codes as poles that form an axis on which our cases can be further examined and understood. The careful placement of the cases on each diagram was based on the findings derived from the data collected through the interviews.

Moving forward with the selective codes, they were further categorized under a set of theoretical categories. The CSR issues and CSR strategy codes were categorized under the theoretical category of Nature of CSR. The Global CSR and Education codes were categorized under the CSR in the MENA category, the Government and Leadership codes were categorized under the Putting CSR into Practice code, whereas the Project Managing CSR code encompasses the Implementing CSR and Project Management selective codes. The theoretical categories are based on interpretive judgements that were made by the first author and principal researcher. These final categories are therefore based on the meaning and context of much of the data subsumed within these groups of codes. The categories were discussed with the research team, and as a result, one of the categories was refined prior to production of this final version.

**TABLE 1** Theoretical categories and concepts

Theoretical code	Concept and codes embodied
Putting CSR into practice	Elements that drive and effect CSR implementation such as government bodies, regulations, laws, and leadership.
Nature of CSR	CSR issues and strategies employed. The specific CSR issues often influence the strategy and approach adopted.
CSR in the MENA	CSR theme identified that encompasses ideas of global CSR and education, both mentioned in the context of the MENA region.
Project Managing CSR	Project managing CSR covers the codes, implementing CSR and project management. This sample of organizations and individuals choose to project manage CSR, whatever the level of complexity of the activities.

Abbreviations: CSR, corporate social responsibility; MENA, Middle East and North Africa.

To further analyse the data through thematic analysis, the literature previously examined was analysed and interpreted in the light of the findings. Theories from the literature were also analysed against each theoretical category and findings compared. Then, the theoretical model was presented and discussed. The main themes derived from the literature that are associated with the theoretical categories embedded in the research data, constitute the same four identified CSR themes as follows: Putting CSR into Practice, Nature of CSR, CSR in the MENA, and Project Managing CSR. There are many other themes expressed in the literature, but these were not within the scope and context of this study on the project management of CSR in a MEDC country.

## 6 | RESULTS

The results from this study indicate that CSR in the UAE, and perhaps the MENA region, is more developed than is depicted in the literature. The results provide some insights to be considered on CSR in the UAE, in the areas of the following: practicing CSR, the nature of CSR, CSR in the MENA, and project managing CSR. In the sample of organizations investigated, the practice of CSR in the UAE is significantly influenced by organizational leadership, which articulates the overall approach when putting CSR into practice. This view was shared by participants, for example, "it needs a serious commitment in the organization, and it needs the commitment and the buy-in from the top ... If there is no buy-in from the top management, it will not happen." In one case, top-level management is also set up with CSR and sustainability related KPIs "100% leadership support from the shareholders, I report to the CEO and the chairman, I have access to them, it's on the CEO'S KPIs ... I put 2 targets for him and his KPIs, I audit him."

In the majority of cases interviewed (21/29), leadership is declared to be undertaking a strategic approach to CSR, with an emphasis placed on CSR activity that contributes to the organizational strategy and goals. For example, "... the overall strategy, we put it in the system so it's already aligned. But also after we finalize the definition of what are the thematic areas, we said that we have to build a strategy for CSR, and we have put a goal, a vision, to be a leading player in the area of corporate citizenship," similarly in another case, "For us, we don't have a specific CSR strategy because everything we do, our overall vision, falls within in that ...."

In some cases, interviewees describe it as "core" to business, based on beliefs and values of leadership, which understand CSR as socio-economic business and not solely social responsibility. For example, one organization calls for internal proposals to fund CSR projects and programmes, and the selection criteria assess whether the project is core to the business, "have the core business and that's the strategic sort of business." Likewise, in another case an interviewee asserted, "One of the things I'd have to say, in none of our work do we ever cover philanthropy or community activities, it doesn't come into what we do. We only look at core business practices." The emphasis on CSR being relevant to the core business is highlighted in the following

comment from a senior executive of a professional service firm: "I think it's a perception issue really, that the big barriers that people can't see the value that CSR can bring. People think it's simply about giving back or it's the thing that sits as the add-on over here; it's not core to the business. So I think the important things around pro bono, that's very much core to our business; that absolutely is our bread and butter."

The commitment of leadership to practice CSR by following a strategic approach sheds light on the nature of CSR in the UAE. These results reveal that the nature of CSR in the UAE is not exclusively philanthropic and focused on charity and donations. The cases examined illustrate that the nature of CSR, in at least this sample of organizations, in the UAE has developed to include strategic, sustainable, and socio-economic forms of CSR. For example, in many of the cases, the point was frequently made that it is important to distinguish individual and corporate acts of philanthropy from CSR practices and strategic CSR.

The majority of organizations examined in this study's sample are involved with CSR of a strategic nature, dealing with issues more relevant to core business and organizational strategy such as transparency, sustainability, operations, policies, decision-making, and supply chains. The process is described in one case as follows:

*So, you start to look more at how it impacts your core business ... looking for mutual beneficial things you can do ... one of the things that they're doing is that they're very keen on women empowerment, women and leadership agenda and that ties in very clearly with the internal stuff that they're doing that's part of the ... strategy which is to make sure that they do not have any agenda discrimination ... and then I think also along with a greater level of sophistication is really starting to look at your core business and how you're operating your business, and then the next stage is looking at how that goes through the value chain also, and ensuring that you are requiring your agents, contractors, suppliers adhering to the same values, principles and practices that you do yourself.*

The interviewee elaborated further, "topics generally of integrity in the supply chain, so whether that's through implementation of codes of conduct, various integrity related practices, including labour practices throughout the supply chain. So, they're very firmly our core topics of interest ..." Another case also illustrates the integration of CSR into business operations as follows:

*Well CSR it's...the global trend...it's sustainability not really CSR ... It's how to be sustainable in your business ... It is easier for companies to donate money ... It is much more challenging to say, "Every manager has to understand the impact of his or her decisions ... not just here, but in other countries as well.*

In relation to CSR in the MENA, education was identified as an important pillar for CSR in the region, a prevalent CSR issue relevant to the



region and also claimed to be reaching a level of understanding of CSR comparable with the West. For instance,

*So, CSR is not anymore CSR, it's a kind of a cross-cutting initiative and with this, we tried to link what we are doing in education with what we are doing in creating employment, with what we are doing with the innovation of the software, even the devices, and try to mix them altogether and try to come with something that makes sense ... what was making sense to us is what we call "youth spark" ... it was obvious that the economic crisis severely hit youth, and if we would like to fix things ... at least let's really clean up and try to come with the next generation ... but also in markets you will see that the category of youth is a majority, and this is how it was very obvious that we will go ahead and focus on giving a "spark to youth.*

More specifically,

*... if we do really look at those type of great assets and try to really leverage them in order to evolve the CSR here in the UAE, that will be incredible. With a big heritage from a culture, religious perspective to a very wide and broad exposure to multi-national and different business entities that are operating here, to an evolving market, by positioning UAE as an international not regional platform anymore.*

Similarly, increased education and awareness in the area of CSR is emphasized by another participant claiming the following: "I think any company which really cares for the CSR ... have to understand CSR properly, not on the area of philanthropic and charity work. Number two, you would have to conduct awareness sessions for the employees and management so that people understand what they're talking about. And then number three, they would have to train managers how to embody CSR into their decision-making on a daily basis. So whenever you're making decisions you're thinking automatically of all the areas of CSR."

Another example of proactive approaches to CSR, including education for capacity building at local levels, was described in relation to suppliers based in a neighbouring country as follows: "So, we are working on a strategy to maximize local content in our supply chain in Oman, we are working on understanding what ventures we can make to help that, which would include education and capability building for certain local suppliers." Another participant described how organizations are becoming more acquainted and aware of CSR issues that are relevant to the countries they operate in; one participant voiced a pointed criticism of how global organizations tend to carry out standard activities such as recycling in the MENA region but have climate change policies in other countries. From these findings, issues relevant to the UAE can be identified such as transparency, women's empowerment, education, and youth engagement. With reference to empowerment, one participant adds "... to support ... women

empowerment, environment activities, children, education, entrepreneurship." Another states the following:

*Well, considering that we work in the space of environment and society ... other than having a very generic program with superficial activities, we just chose one very specific element, which is knowledge management in our key stakeholder group, Emiratis. So, we've assessed that through the ambitious implementation of the numerous strategies of Dubai, of Abu Dhabi, of the UAE, there will be gaps in very specific fields. And what we try to do is to attract Emiratis to play a role within this space.*

On the implementation of CSR, results from the study indicate that CSR in these specific organizations is predominantly project managed. CSR activities in the various cases range from a few cases of simple CSR issues such as recycling to more cases involving projects and programmes designed to manage issues such as transparency, youth engagement, entrepreneurship, and talent management. The results reveal that all organizations involved in this study manage CSR through projects and programmes except one, suggesting that project management is an effective and common means of implementing CSR activity in the UAE. For instance, one of the organizations involved runs a CSR programme engaging UAE youth in CSR activity that is project managed to produce sustainable outcomes as follows: "The most important element is you know what project management is, because the day after the test we start project planning ... Project planning for the containers. So design, conceptualization, bill of quantities, things of this nature. And then we start with climate change training, so that they understand why we are doing all this."

This is important, as many organizations in our sample seem to be project managing CSR, providing structure and monitoring CSR operations. So, issues such as entrepreneurship, youth engagement, and sustainability are managed through projects and programme, for instance, the "Arab Social Entrepreneurship Program" and the "Carbon Ambassadors Program." A number of cases also mention "the Project Manger role" in implementing CSR activity through projects and programmes. In one case, stakeholders are also managed with a project management lens,

*"Now the next exercise that we're now working on is to identify what are the targets and goals in each of our focus areas, and then calling for other partners to contribute with us to achieve this. That would allow us to track impact from one side ... and allow you to pick up and select the best partners that can contribute with you to do this ... it will also allow you create a culture within the UAE and maybe the region to follow certain criteria, because we'll have very clear selection criteria based on program management, how they do things, how they monitor, and how efficient they are. And by doing so, we're trying to advocate for the best practices in the market."*

Project management phases and features have also been frequently associated with the CSR activities mentioned in the sample examined. Repeated mentions of planning, design, procurement, monitoring, return on investments, and KPIs suggest that CSR is project managed in the UAE. For example, "It's a project ... it was under the energy efficiency program. So it was a project that has just basically created a new project. So, the delivery of one project then created a new project ..." Moreover, "So when we have a program; when we start the whole process, within the objectives of the program, we also have some measures in place, where at the end of the program what do you hope to achieve?" Another participant states "... we want to have our own culture so we are using sustainability as one of our main pillars ... I invested more than 35,000,000 AED in energy efficiency, and it's part of the finance technical exercise, because we got ROI in 1.8 years, people can get bonuses, we are making money out of it you know, so, ... it's embedded I would say." Similarly, another case involves a CSR project related to irrigation, "We can say to them we're saving X amount of liters of water a year on this development where you're living and we're saving on you service charge. They're extremely happy, one-because we're protecting the environment and two-because we're saving them money. So, it's a win-win for everybody." This is significant to the region, as CSR has been claimed in the literature to be implemented mainly through donations and charity events that lack structure and management, with no specific mention of returns from socio-economic CSR.

Based on results, which include data from a period of 5 years, we can see that CSR in the sample of organizations studied in the UAE has developed on from the typical philanthropic CSR often associated with the region, to a more sophisticated socio-economic form of CSR. The project management approach adopted by many of these firms for implementing CSR is also an indication to the developing CSR landscape of the UAE, as it also brings to light the advancements in management and execution of CSR, which are of relevance to academics and practitioners.

## 7 | DISCUSSION

The most significant finding of this study is the evidence of CSR activity of various degrees of management sophistication, being project managed to implement CSR activity in organizations. This association has been made and supported in the literature reviewed. However, it has not been mentioned or examined in the context of CSR in the UAE, or the wider region. The available literature discusses the philanthropic nature of CSR but does not provide information about the project management implementation of it, which is an area where this study makes a contribution to knowledge. The interviews reveal that CSR activity is project managed but also is perceived strategically by the majority of organizations involved in this study.

Another significant result that is in conflict with findings expressed in the academic literature (e.g., Jamali & Neville, 2011; Katsioloudes & Brodtkorb, 2007) is the presence of strategic CSR in several corporate organizations in the UAE. The majority of cases examined exhibited a

level of strategic and socio-economic CSR that was not anticipated. Only two cases demonstrated a "misunderstanding" about CSR as commonly defined in the mass media and scholarly literature. This was probably due to the fact that these two particular interviewees were more limited in their knowledge of CSR. They seemed to understand CSR as connected to philanthropy and religion, much as described in some of the academic literature on CSR in the MENA region. These findings show that CSR in the region needs to be examined more closely. The study also indicates, perhaps surprisingly in the light of assumptions drawn from the literature, that CSR in some organizations in the UAE is being implemented consistent with global standards such as the UN Global Compact.

The institutional findings for CSR in the UAE provide insight into the nature and management of CSR in the region. These include discovering the significant role of government and leadership as drivers for CSR in the UAE (Haak-Saheem, Festing, & Darwish, 2017). The results reveal strong connections between leadership and government/industry relationships. In this sample of organizations, the stronger the ties an organization has with the government, the more CSR is driven by the leadership of the organization. Similarly, from a study that also examines the power of government as institutional drivers for CSR, Schrempf-Stirling et al. (2016, p. 706) state that "one potential, although not determinative, source of evidence for the strength of institutional power is the behavior of other corporations in the same context. If, effectively, no actor was willing or able to resist the prevailing norms, this is evidence of a strong institutional context. Alternatively, if other corporations in the same context did behave differently, this is an indication that institutional pressures were lower." The research reported in this paper finds that organizations that are more closely involved with the government are more likely to do more in CSR.

Based on the sample, it can be argued that where governmental institutional pressure is increased, it is more likely to ensure that all corporations achieve global standards when adopting and implementing CSR. This would also contribute to motivating global corporations, which in this research study sample, are not doing much locally in comparison to their global CSR activities, to take on more responsibility, and commit and engage in CSR to the same extent as they would in any other developed country. This is an area that is recommended for study in future research. Researchers could examine organizations within the UAE and other countries, focusing on the relationships with identified institutional drivers, of which one can be governmental ties to evaluate the effect of institutional pressure to implement CSR.

These findings add to knowledge on CSR in the UAE and the region and are useful to the wider literature on CSR. As suggested by Burke and Logsdon (1996, p. 501), there is a need for "exploring the linkage between CSR and the alliance behaviors of firms as well as examining the role of industry leaders in establishing norms for CSR and in innovating strategic CSR. This study provides insight on both areas. Based on the evidence from these interview case studies, CSR in the UAE is more strategic than it is predominantly philanthropic. The available literature on CSR in the UAE and even in the

MENA is limited and built upon much earlier findings that now seem to be out-of-date and do not include the current policies and practices on CSR in the UAE and MENA. The sample of organizations engaged in this research demonstrates that CSR is being implemented by small groups of influential corporations based on a strategic and modern perspective focused on achieving socio-economic results. Philanthropy is still present, arising more due to national culture rather than organizational and project cultures (Rees-Caldwell & Pinnington, 2013). Organizationally, some of the firms involved have even made a point to avoid use of the word “philanthropy,” choosing instead to focus on the socio-economic form of CSR, which an influential group

of government and corporate leaders in the UAE advocate as the appropriate approach to CSR in the contemporary world.

In contrast to the literature that implies CSR is unorganized and misinterpreted in the MENA region, it was found that even the firms leaning towards a philanthropic and traditional approach to CSR organize and implement these initiatives through projects. They are structured as such that they are started and completed as projects rather than executed in an unorganized and ad hoc manner.

The data collected have shown that CSR activity taking place in these particular cases has been project-managed. This applies across strategic programmes for youth engagement and more basic and

**TABLE 2** Identified CSR themes

Identified CSR themes	Examples from the Literature	Examples from the Interviews
Putting CSR into Practice	“Companies being successful in managing CSR activities could have their CSR values embedded into their work philosophy and culture by the founder and since the beginning of the organizations.” (Virakul, Koonmee, & McLean, 2009, p. 1991)	<p>“This is what our CEO believes, and then this is what the organization believes”, therefore it's more DNA like, business like.”</p> <p>“... the way leadership decides it, that's the way the ship is going to sail.”</p> <p>“... it often depends on the values and the drive at the leadership level of the organization.”</p>
Nature of CSR	“In the wake of antiglobalization movements ... and at a time when the market strength of corporations is derived largely from brand image, there has been a need for companies to demonstrate an awareness of social, human and environmental issues.” (Sahlin-Andersson, 2006, p. 596)	<p>“That's really the global trend ... what we call it sustainability not really CSR now anymore. It's how to be sustainable in your business... But then we talk about CSR or CR, you are talking about how you conduct your own business”</p> <p>“... in none of our work do we ever cover philanthropy or community activities, it does not come into what we do. We only look at core business practices.”</p> <p>“Our CEO very much aligned with this, he does not talk about donations anymore, we banned the word philanthropy. We talk about contribution, we talk about partnerships, we talk about investment ...”</p>
CSR in the MENA	Political, financial, economical, educational and cultural systems shape CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008)	<p>“Naturally, the UK, Europe, Australia and America and Canada, there is more regulation ... so there is a certain piece where you do have to do as the regulation requires, however, we make sure we do not do it because we have to but because we want to, because we feel it's an important part of our business.”</p> <p>“It's a huge multi-national bank with a huge climate change policy outside the region, so you are telling me that you talk about climate change in the UK or the US, because the government push you to do that ...”</p> <p>“... we sort of try and tailor things and say what are relevant issues for the Middle East? And that's particularly within the community quadrant. And from our perspective, we have looked at areas such as healthcare and education, as being two pressing issues within the region, as areas that we wanted to tailor our efforts on.”</p>
Project Managing CSR	“There is a significant growth in the adoption of project management disciplines to accomplish work in different sectors and industries.” (Too & Weaver, 2014, p. 1382)	<p>“Well, for the organization, obviously for us we have deliverables associated with those projects and programs.”</p> <p>“Everything is a small project ... Everything was like a project. Even if we have outside campaign, it's a project.”</p> <p>“We are actually project based”</p>

Abbreviations: CSR, corporate social responsibility; MENA, Middle East and North Africa.

simple projects like blood drives being managed through projects, programmes, and portfolios. This is a significant finding illustrating that CSR in the UAE is more structured and well-managed than was concluded based on earlier research. Much of the CSR activity in these cases has also been reported to be implemented through supply chains, operations, and projects, which are in some cases part of programmes and portfolios.

The theoretical categories were then further analysed and interpreted in the light of the CSR literature and some examples are illustrated in Table 2, which we call, Identified CSR themes.

All of the organizations examined in this study manage their CSR operations through projects and programmes, albeit with varying degrees of sophistication in their project execution. The exploratory data in this study reveal therefore that some organizations in the UAE are managing their CSR as strategic, socio-economic activities through projects and programmes.

Moreover, only two of the examined organizations in the UAE displayed formal implementation of philanthropy, whereas one showed informal implementation. All 28 cases of CSR strategy examined, except for one organization that emphasized corporate philanthropy alongside strategic management, implemented CSR activities through project management methods. The CSR initiatives are approached and implemented as projects or programmes regardless of the degree of sophistication. Eight of the cases examined explicitly mention the use of programme management methods and tools.

Overall, it appears that the findings support the theoretical framework advanced and challenge some of the literature on CSR in the MENA region. Although philanthropic CSR does exist and is likely to continue to be important, the participants in the sample of organizations examined are more focused on strategic CSR. The added value and potential of strategic CSR is actively pursued by most of the study's participants. The role of project management in the implementation of CSR is highly apparent in almost all cases examined. Regardless of the level of sophistication of the organization's CSR policies and practices, it is implemented through project management methods. This evidence challenges the assumption that CSR is misunderstood and largely unstructured in the MENA region. In this sample of organizations, at least, there is active execution of project management systems, tools, and processes for implementing CSR.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

The research reported in this paper explores the current landscape of CSR in the UAE revealing important elements contributing to its development and sustainability. The study identifies significant factors, processes, and developments related to CSR in the UAE that have not been included in current academic literature. These include the role of government and leadership in driving CSR, the successful management of CSR through projects, and the existing strategic and evolving approach to CSR in the UAE. Our study design concentrated mainly on one of these research issues, namely the management of CSR through projects.

Moreover, the data examined has illustrated the practical and operational approach project management can provide when undertaking CSR activity, helping align CSR to both organizational, country, and regional goals. The organization and management of CSR have been examined on how managers can attempt to keep CSR goal-orientated, aligned, and strategic particularly through projects.

Project management has been argued in the literature to be a successful and an efficient way of managing CSR activities. This study has focused on the management of CSR through projects, revealing that the mechanism, techniques, and project phases can be applied to CSR initiatives, and in some cases, help to successfully implement CSR in a more structured way that improves profits, reduces risks, and contributes to sustainable goals. This is an area that could be further examined, perhaps with the theoretical framework developed in this study taken into account. Generally, exploring more CSR cases through a project management perspective would increase and improve our knowledge on the implementation and management of CSR not only regionally but globally. It would also add to the current body of literature and help create more knowledge on strategic CSR projects. Further, it can inform how implementation of CSR contributes to project success and effective organizational management through projects. In conclusion, we have reported some exploratory findings of strategic CSR projects implemented in organizations in the UAE and recommend that future research examines the contribution of project management methods to capacity development in CSR.

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