

## Article

# Managing Sustainability Projects for Social Impact from a Corporate Social Responsibility Perspective

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**Abstract:** Initiatives in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can contribute to many programs for sustainable development. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is considered to have been slower to change in CSR than have other Western developed countries. The purpose of this research is to explore examples in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of how project initiatives in CSR and sustainable development can facilitate heightened awareness, engagement, and execution of action for sustainability. This research utilizes qualitative case study methods analysing a United Nations (UN) supported annual youth engagement program focused on implementation of sustainable development projects in the UAE. The varying degrees of project complexity and “programmification” of sustainability activities in the UAE reveals a more systematic and mature stage of CSR and sustainable development projects and programs than is reported in the literature. The application of project management to organize, implement, align, and monitor sustainability-centred programs provides knowledge relevant to the UAE and other countries interested in the strategic management of change. The study demonstrates the application and value of project management for implementing sustainable development initiatives and highlights the collaborative contribution of corporate and governmental stakeholders to project management in organizations. An important area for future research on sustainable development in the MENA region is to study corporate and public sector partnerships in CSR projects and sustainability programs.

**Keywords:** sustainability; project management; corporate social responsibility; programs



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## 1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a well understood concept [1–5] that in the MENA region has been portrayed as mainly philanthropic and unstructured in practice, more or less implying that it is ill-managed [6,7]. CSR can be defined as organizational decisions or actions that deal with social, corporate governance, ethical, and environmental issues [8]. Managerial decisions to adopt or participate in CSR projects depend on management's perceptions and willingness to reap benefits from CSR over the long-term. The strategic form of CSR may result in enhanced financial performance as well as positive social, corporate governance, ethical, or environmental impact. Project managing CSR strategies has potential for more effectively aligning CSR issues with organizational goals, which in turn may lead to positive long-term benefits for financial performance, internal and external organizational stakeholders, and the community.

While there is a group of publications on CSR activities in the UAE in government, and local and international corporate organizations [9–12], there is limited information on the application of project management to CSR and sustainable, social innovations. This research study explores the management of CSR through projects and examines its implementation in the context of a sustainable development program supported by the UN.

The significance of such research is that it provides insight into the project management of CSR in a country in the MENA region considered to be a combination of underdeveloped and developing countries. Even so, several countries have been developing rapidly such as the UAE, which is now categorized as a more economically developed country (MEDC).

A growing number of organizations are becoming projectized [13,14] and recently others have become more project-orientated than they were in earlier decades [15]. More organizations are transforming from managing operations to project management methods to gain a competitive advantage [16]. CSR is significant to many organizations' business and management decisions that have direct social impacts and CSR is also important to the growth and development of the UAE economy in order for it to become a global business hub. The purpose is to contribute to the academic literature on CSR policy and practice in the areas of CSR implementation within sustainable development programs and particularly its strategic management through projects and programs. The main aim is to contribute to theory on the use of project management to organise and implement CSR activity for strategic change in sustainable development programs. The study also intends to inform the reader on developments in CSR in the Middle East and relevant social and institutional factors for strategic CSR implementation in the context of sustainable development.

Project management methods are useful for managing CSR through projects, portfolios, and programs [17,18]. For example, in cases where CSR is less integrated within an organization, CSR may be treated as a short-term project, with a fixed date and objectives. However, in other cases where CSR is integrated within an organizational structure and is a more mainstream, regular activity, it may be implemented under programs where initiatives and sets of projects are run simultaneously for the long term. In this case, it is probable that CSR will be regarded by managers as contributing long-term to the business strategy whereas with short-term projects, CSR may be seen as a temporary endeavour in response to internal employee advocacy or external stakeholder pressures. Clearly, the critical consideration is the extent the CSR program or initiative is strategic [19,20]. A project or portfolio of projects or programs is more likely to be strategic, whenever the CSR content and organized projects are aligned with the strategic intent and plans of the organization [21,22]. Some authors recommend that project initiatives should be managed and measured as part of a project portfolio [23,24] at the organizational level, and this approach is worthwhile for internally monitoring strategic CSR activities and planned outcomes [25]. Project management presents various alternatives and methods of managing CSR activities and operations. Project management skills and competences are becoming increasingly appreciated by senior management as an important area of specialization necessitating project managers to acquire experience and project management qualifications. Over the last 25 years, project management has also become more acknowledged to be a professional management skill and is even defined in some scholarly publications as one of the new business professions [26–28].

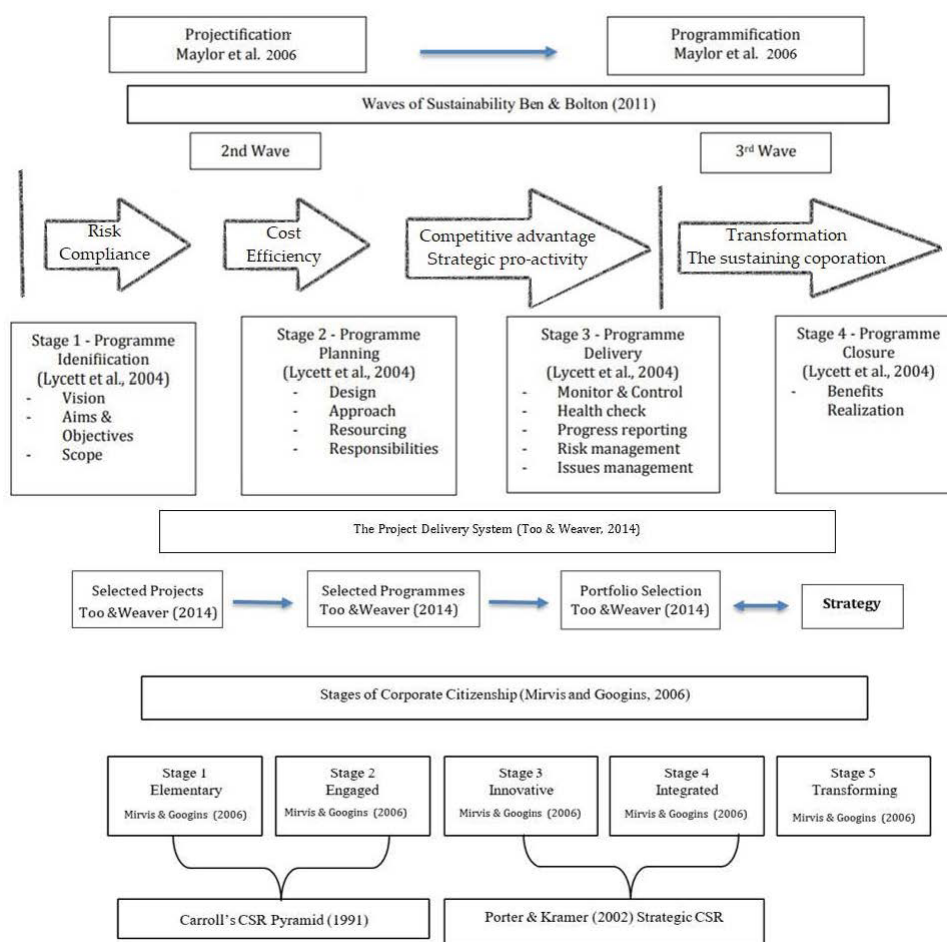
The idea of managing CSR projects is present in the CSR literature and the connections between CSR and PM has been debated for some years [29]. In this case, as we are researching CSR from both the project and program levels, we argue that project management could present a means of more productively managing strategic CSR activities and operations within a firm than is typical of more traditional hierarchical management approaches. Interestingly, this association of CSR with projects and programs has been considered in the literature for over fifty years with CSR specifically conceptualized in the form of programs [30]. Not only can project management be used to run CSR activities but the inclusion of CSR in projects can also promote organizational and societal values and has the potential to increase brand reputation and image [31,32]. Within projects, CSR also has the capacity to reduce operational risks and save costs [33]. Operational risks and costs are two of the most common difficulties faced in projects but there can be additional sources of value in CSR for projectized and project-oriented organizations [34]. Other benefits of CSR in projects are the ability of CSR to promote values, motivate employees, and help retain them [35]. These features of CSR are salient for any organization but

maybe even more so to project-based organizations, whenever cost reduction and risks mitigation are very significant considerations. From the literature, we can see that these relationships between CSR and PM may lead to benefits such as less operational costs for projects and a higher awareness of issues of CSR implementation. Reflecting on the CSR literature, the use of CSR in projects can also draw attention to the value of CSR employed deliberately and strategically by organizations to achieve social goals, reduce costs, and motivate employees. In relation to the context, the UAE, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, in particular, are two well-developed emirates (e.g., states) for conducting research on understanding CSR in the UAE as well as for examining CSR initiatives, projects, and programs. The country is a dynamic trading nation with substantial oil and gas reserves similar to other GCC countries and so a study based on the UAE is relevant particularly to countries with political, religious, and cultural resemblances. The UAE is a rapidly developing country where many business operations and activities are treated as projects. The high use of projects in the UAE provides a good opportunity for understanding CSR in the form of projects and even programs. Moreover, with numerous local and international organizations running businesses in the UAE; this could lead to more insights into how local and international organizations regard CSR differently and whether there are any differences in the management and organization of their CSR projects and programs.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, it examines some of the relevant literature addressing strategic CSR perspectives on project and program management of CSR. Then, the methodology and selected methods of qualitative case study research are explained. Next, the case study of a UN development program (UNDP) is reported and the case data on its project management are analysed and interpreted for the extent that they could be defined as strategic CSR and strategic project management. Then, these results on the program for sustainable development are discussed, conclusions made, and recommendations given for future research.

## **2. A Theoretical Framework for Project Managing Strategic CSR in Sustainable Development Programs**

Looking further into the project management of CSR, CSR has to be integrated into organizations' daily operations to strategically address societal and organizational needs [36]. Project managing CSR can help keep CSR dynamically aligned with organizational goals and strategies. Furthermore, programs (of projects) have been declared to be, "... well placed to establish a bridge between projects and the strategic goals of an organization ... leaders have increasingly used projects and programs to implement or support the realisation of corporate strategy [37] (p. 230)." Some project governance frameworks argue that CSR stems from the governance system, which involves top-level governance boards, which later extend into the management system, which involves strategy, and then finally the project delivery system, which involves project and program management [38] (p. 1389). Having reviewed some of the connections between the fields of PM and CSR, we present below (See Figure 1) our framework combining the elements of project management and the levels of CSR based on the literature. As shown in Figure 1, CSR and strategy are placed in the same part of the framework, implying that they are part of the governance system that is then managed through the management system. Portfolio selection is important as it "focuses on selecting the right projects and programs to maintain or start, and which to defer or cancel in order to minimize the transaction costs ... " [38] (p. 1388). Thus, portfolio selection is useful for ensuring projects and programs are in line with organizational goals and strategy. These same authors also add, "The mechanisms include terminating projects that no longer contribute to the organization's strategic plan and reallocation of resources to activities that do contribute to the strategic plan."



**Figure 1.** Project and Program Management for Strategic CSR [16,39–44].

The above framework (Figure 1) illustrates the linkages between project management and CSR. It shows how project management processes can be used to advance the development and implementation of strategic CSR. It is also potentially a useful tool for benchmarking organizations' project management and CSR practices. The more advanced an organization is with its CSR activity; the more "programmification" occurs [16]. The project management life cycle [39] is included for its practicality and applicability to CSR. For example, Stage 2—program planning is applicable to CSR activity where literature has stressed the importance of monitoring CSR projects and programs to ensure they are in line with strategy. Stage 1—program activity is less relevant to the CSR activity this case study focuses on but is included to show how a strategic vision is needed when a project or program is identified. The project delivery system model [40] is critical to this framework as it shows that the project and program management of CSR should be derived from strategy, as organizations develop their involvement in CSR, their initiated projects will grow to selected programs, which are part of the process of portfolio selection, which is linked to strategy. In the framework, the transition from projects to programs is correlated with the stages of corporate citizenship [43] as well as the waves of the sustainability model, progressing from processes of compliance to sustainable organizational transformation [44]. As CSR develops and becomes more projectized, initiatives which later grew into strategic programs can be positively transforming for the organization and society. In summary, diverse concepts of CSR, project management and organization, and institutionalist theory are all consistent with the argument that positive outcomes can be achieved through project managing CSR.

The strategic CSR literature provides evidence that CSR can be adopted in more efficient and effective ways that are both economically and socially more responsible. In

turn, project management theories such as projectification and programmification provide a sound logic and reasoning to manage CSR through projects for effective strategic implementation. In the framework (Figure 1), project management is asserted to be significant to aligning CSR with organizational strategy to achieve organizational goals. These theories examined together reveal that CSR and project management can function together to advance organizational strategic outcomes and also serve the goals of society, community, and sustainable development. Thus, including CSR in project management (as also advocated in the PMBOK guide [45]) better prepares organizations for risks and difficulties related to health, safety, and the environment, including sustainable development.

Overall, the theoretical models identified above once combined provide a challenging framework for studying CSR in the UAE whilst examining the organizational, institutional, and project management dimensions to better understand the development and implementation of CSR in a less-developed region. The proposed theoretical framework contributes to the limited literature connecting project management, CSR, and sustainable development programs by examining the management and implementation of CSR through project management, in a UAE sustainable development program supported by the UNDP. The examination of CSR in the UAE addresses a gap in the available literature on CSR in developing countries, which is important, as many developing countries are associated with the high consumption of natural resources and negative effects on the social and natural environments, which both need to be addressed. Hence, the framework seeks to advance the theory and practice of project management and strategic development of CSR in the context of economic and social development through sustainable development programs.

### 3. Methods

Qualitative methods are utilized in this study for understanding how individuals perceive CSR and how they define and practice it in one sustainable development program. Qualitative research allows for close proximity to the participants, which supports collection of rich data [46]. Qualitative empirical studies have been effectively used in recent CSR research by scholars [47–50]. The grounded theory approach is adopted as it aims to “generate or discover a theory” [51], which is appropriate to the exploratory nature of this study. Interpretive approaches can assist illuminative portrayals of the subjective realities of participants in CSR and project management activities [52]. Grounded theory allows for developing theory from data instead of validating theory as in quantitative research. The case studies reported in this paper are exploratory, identifying themes and exploring the management and understanding of CSR projects in the UAE. Analysis of the collected data followed standard steps of grounded analysis [53]. First, open coding facilitating analysis of all possible concepts that might lead to building theory; second, selective coding to create higher level, applicable and general themes and concepts; and third, theoretical coding to establish a more abstract and succinct conceptualization of the fundamental theoretical concepts [54].

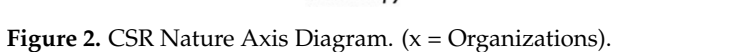
The data were collected from a participant case study involving a program of seven projects consisting of 80 project members. NVIVO 12 was used to analyse the data and create open codes, selective codes and theoretical categories, and themes. Firstly, data were coded using the “Grounded Theory Coding” approach to break down and categorize the data into 97 codes in order to derive a theory based on analysis of the data. Coding via NVivo software allows the researcher to create “nodes” during processes of open coding, which represents the different codes used to categorize and classify data collected. This is the first step that later on leads on to identification and comparison of similar patterns and associations between the different concepts and sources of data. Next, selective coding was employed to further classify and develop the codes into more general concepts. This stage of coding identified relevant themes and conceptual categories, which can be represented by “parent nodes” in the NVivo software, encompassing the previously identified open codes into more general and revealing concepts detected from the data.

Theoretical coding is the final step eventually creating theoretical categories based on researcher analysis and interpretation of the selective codes and consideration of alternative



The diagram is a 2x2 matrix with the following structure:

- Vertical Axis (CSR STRATEGY):**
  - Top: Transforming
  - Bottom: Philanthropy
- Horizontal Axis (CSR ISSUES):**
  - Left: NO CSR
  - Right: Synergistic CSR
- Quadrants:**
  - Top-Left (Integrated):** Contains four 'x' marks.
  - Top-Right (Transparency):** Contains two 'x' marks.
  - Bottom-Left (Engaged):** Empty.
  - Bottom-Right (Operational Impact):** Empty.



Portfolio, Program



## 4. Case Study

### 4.1. Case Introduction

The case selected for this study is based on CSR, project management and sustainability organizations in the UAE. Specifically, a 12-month annual strategic youth engagement program run by a UAE based organization and aligned to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) standards is carefully examined. In terms of strategy, this program is aligned with the goals of the managing organization and contributes to the vision and goals of the UAE in general and even more specifically with the sustainability goals of the 2021 vision. It has been designed to serve the sustainability agenda as well as to serve the community and environment by creating positive social impact through empowering Emirati youth and by developing their project management and sustainability knowledge and skills. The socio-economic projects of the program form the basis of the case study, which enabled analytic generalization based on developed and emergent theory [55].

The program is a youth engagement sustainability program that trains and develops its participants in project management and sustainability skills. In this case, the 2nd cycle of the program is examined. It is run annually to involve more participants in the path to sustainability and contributing to the UAE's goals and visions regarding sustainability and social innovation.

### 4.2. Organization Profile

The organizations related to the case study are the DXBB, a 'Private Joint Stock Company' (PJSC) owned between a governmental authority related to electricity, (DXAA), another company related to natural resources (EDXB), ENW and DUW Holding. This sustainable development program was established in 2011 in agreement by a governmental council and the UNDP, to "capture a growing niche market, catering specifically for the transition to a low-carbon and green economy through the consolidation of knowledge". The organization focuses on the development and integration of sustainable initiatives and programs in the UAE. DXBB is highly projectized, with a program- and project-based approach to all organizational operations and activities.

Furthermore, all DXBB employees are required to train for project management skills via PRINCE2 (PRojects IN Controlled Environments), which is one of the leading methods of project management training. It is used to improve project management skills and described as, "a de facto process-based method for effective project management. Used extensively by the UK Government, PRINCE2 is also widely recognized and used in the private sector, both in the UK and internationally. The PRINCE2 method is in the public domain, and offers non-proprietary best practice guidance on project management." [56] All employees are expected to take an exam and become PRINCE2 certified as it is highly relevant to the way DXBB operates. The focus of the case study is the Carbon Ambassadors Program (CAP), which was initiated by DXBB in 2014. After the success of the first CAP cycle, DXAA, the mother company to DXBB took over management responsibility for the CAP program; hence, CAP is now owned by DXAA and managed in consultation and collaboration with DXBB.

### 4.3. Carbon Ambassadors Program

CAP is a yearlong reoccurring program initially developed by DXBB and DXAA. CAP contributes to the UAE's 2021 vision, Dubai Plan 2021, and Dubai Integrated Energy Strategy 2030, which all include sustainability and clean energy goals. The nature of the program also contributes to social innovation, as participants are required to innovate with a specific set of resources to produce a sustainable project outcome. Moreover, the program has been developed in accordance with UNDP standards and is supported by a local ministry. The program is developed to engage and train local youth by providing key training and development in the areas of sustainability, carbon emissions reduction and adaptation and mitigation. The program also includes sustainability related extra-curricular

activities, workshops, and final turnkey projects to implement and test the skills acquired during the program.

The first cycle of the program was completed with 40 students enrolled from different universities in the UAE. The program has grown impressively since then, with the second cycle involving 80 Emirati students and employees from different universities and government and semi-government entities. The cycle also involved seven entities from both government and private sectors; aiding in the participation and collaboration between private and government entities for local programs and initiatives. The participants of the program are labelled as “carbon ambassadors”, which is intended to emphasize the role and responsibilities the youth are taking on once they complete the program. As Emirati youth who are knowledgeable and skilled in project management and sustainability, the youth are expected to become representatives for the sustainability agenda, the program, and the UAE vision. The 80 enrolled carbon ambassadors were divided into groups to represent each of the seven entities. Each entity was represented by a team and assigned a mentor for guidance and support during the program. The program commences with an initiation phase, e-learning and practical key trainings, and finally a turnkey project, which involves the teams working on retrofitting a recycled used container to create a sustainable turnkey project, which is eco-friendly and can be used to serve the entity and community. The training includes three key modules: PRINCE2 (online training program in project management—Foundation Course), GHG Training (Green House Gas Inventory), and ESCO Training (energy performance contracting, energy audits and an introduction to LEED).

PRINCE2 training is a widely known and recognized training course in the practical area of project management. For CAP to be successful, it was considered essential that its ambassadors develop the project management skills that are needed later on to implement the turnkey project. The training was made available online for 8 h each week, at the participants preferred timing, with a one-hour multiple-choice exam consisting of 75 questions. A number of ambassadors successfully completed all stages of the online training and qualified to sit for the exam, which was taken at the DXBB offices with a PRINCE2 examiner attending from the UK. This resulted in a number of the carbon ambassadors taking the paper-based exam at the DXBB offices with a professional and actually becoming Prince 2 Foundation certified with the practitioner certification accredited by APMG International. The GHG training foundation is for the ISO14064: GHG Accounting & Verifier Certification. It was a three-day training that was conducted by a project manager of the UAE GHG Inventory. The ESCO Concepts for Green Buildings was an interactive discussion, where the participants developed knowledge and understanding on energy performance contracting, energy audits, and an introduction to the “Measurement and Verification” framework. The session also included an introduction to Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), which is an influential “rating system devised by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) to evaluate the environmental performance of a building and encourage market transformation towards sustainable design”.

After the training was successfully completed, the ambassadors applied their sustainability and project management skills acquired to start implementation work on their recycled sustainable containers. At this stage, the planning and design phases of the project had already been completed by the teams of ambassadors with the practical work set to begin on the containers. This process started with procurement, with the teams independently contacting a number of contractors to tender for their projects. Once bids were received, the team selected the most suitable contractor for their project and budget, and the contract was then approved by their mentor to ensure that the contracted entity was aware of relevance, costs, and intended outcomes of the project. By this stage, the ambassadors had gained skills in project planning, sustainable design, procurement, team-work, and construction, and application of many of these skills was apparent in the final outcome of innovative socio-economic containers (Table 1).



**Table 1.** Program Projects Summary.

Entity	Project	Project Description
A	Providing Drinking Water Kibera Slum	The project included the innovative and sustainable transformation of a 20-foot converted shipping container into a water purification unit that uses reverse osmosis and can operate solely on solar energy, with a capacity of 800 gallons. Furthermore, the project highlights the importance of providing drinking water to the disadvantaged/neglected category of the Kibera community, notably elderly people, patients in hospitals, and children.
B	Services Container	The project transformed the recycled container to a hybrid green mobile services centre that provides different services of organization B to the public to be placed in crowded areas. It is designed in a way that serves the handicapped as well, including a comfortable waiting area, cooling system, different services like vending machines and mobile chargers and contains a visual display using a projector.
C	Sustainable Green Offices	The project involved converting an ISO recycled shipping container to a sustainable office container for six workstations, in line with Dubai vision 2021 and Expo 2020. It provided a green solution to a shortage of office space that organization C was experiencing.
D	Classroom for Refugee Camps	This project utilised the container to showcase ideas that revolve around sustainability, carbon emissions reduction, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. The container was planned to be a portable and sustainable school space as well as a refuge in dire areas.
E	Aquaponic Plant Factory	The recycled shipping container was converted to a mobile plant factory growing various plants using LED artificial light, CO <sub>2</sub> , and controlled amounts of water.
F	Mobile Kiosk	The project involved creating a mobile kiosk for advertising and selling organization F products at different locations. The container was transferred into a mobile sustainable kiosk that is reused in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner at different events. The container was built as a sustainable mobile kiosk for marketing, selling products, and developing climate change awareness.
G	Coral Reef Project	This project involved sustainable technology to help grow and protect coral life. Corals from the same environment were planted on two steel structures, which were designed by the members and built-in organization G workshops. The project uses the control approach to test the validity of the Bio Rock technology in improving coral growth as opposed to the natural growth approach. The Bio Rock technology entailed designing a steel structure connected to a solar powered system to provide an electric current to the frame, which in return induces the coral growth.

#### 4.4. CAP Program Outcomes

As illustrated by Table 1, the teams applied their acquired sustainability and project management skills to bring to life a turnkey project using a recycled shipping container, which served the purposes of their contracted supporting organization, the community, and the environment. The projects provided tangible and intangible, financial and non-financial results such as awareness generated, economic value, cost savings, and actual return on investments. In the case of one project, the contracted organization used it as a kiosk located at popular tourist attractions. The project that designed a sustainable office was later on used by the contracted organization as a solution to an office space shortage. Other projects also received expressions of interest to be purchased by different organizations, showing great economic value and also appreciation of the sustainable features incorporated.

Project management features of the program included tools such as Gantt charts, which were used for planning by the contracting organization and the carbon ambassadors for their turnkey projects. PRINCE2 training and qualifications were provided for both the

organization staff and the CAP participants. Project management skills such as planning, designing, and procurement were utilized by both the organizations' employees and the program participants. From a sustainability perspective, the program represents a strategic socio-economic program, serving many stakeholders with both monetary and non-monetary benefits. These include and are not limited to the UAE, the parent organizations, Emirati youth, contractors, partner entities, the community, and the environment. Moreover, CSR and sustainability skills and knowledge were developed in participants. PR and actual economic value were achieved; projects were displayed as part of the Dubai Solar Show at WETEX/WGES (Water, Energy, Technology, and Environment Exhibition), with many visitors and exhibitors interested in purchasing the projects. One such project, which cost 250,000 AED to produce, was offered to be purchased for over a 1,000,000 AED, indicating good ROI and economic value. Business value was also evident in the form of PR where many other organizations wanted to collaborate in future in CAP.

The case study revealed evidence of knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising associated with the sustainable projects implemented in the CAP sustainable development program. As a participant researcher, the first author was able to see the interactions associated with the program at WETEX (Water, Energy, Technology, and Environment Exhibition) where all of the transformed containers were displayed with their teams present to introduce and discuss their projects to visitors and exhibitors. The knowledge and skills of participants were witnessed first-hand, specifically some of the most important gains of this program and common CSR goals were participant knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising.

For instance, regularly during the exhibition, project B was visited; the container was designed to resemble the full services related to organization B, but a simple yet significant additional feature was that it had a bicycle attached to generate power for phone charging. This was not unheard of or innovative in one sense, but it attracted many visitors who wanted to actually test the bicycle. One time it was surrounded by a crowd of school children who were queuing in front of the container to test out the feature, with ambassadors from the team explaining to them the technology used; the students were excited not only by learning about how this could generate energy, but also because they could operate it for themselves. Such moments, generating practical awareness and interest in sustainable energy, illustrate intangible and important outcomes of the program. Another example of knowledge-sharing was the project A container. This container contained reverse osmosis technology to extract clean drinking water from dry areas where clean water was difficult to access. It was intended for a slum in Kenya, which demonstrates the geographical reach of the program. It gained interest from many visitors and exhibitors interested in implementing this technology in their own projects. In one instance, a young Emirati (local) also approached the team asking about the technology and contacts to help install this technology at his own farm in the UAE. These encounters are but a few examples of the program possessing potential to be a transformational program. It has been especially transformational for its participants many who became carbon ambassadors, equipped with project management skills and sustainability knowledge, helping to advance the UAE's 2021 sustainability goals.

This case study illustrates the implementation of project managing strategic CSR in the UAE. The case provides a real-life and current example of strategic CSR being strategically managed through projects highlighting an example of strategic orientation of CSR in the UAE. It also sheds light on the mechanism and form in which CSR is managed, in addition to revealing the existence and role of project management of CSR. The case study demonstrates the use of project management elements and skills to sustainably run a strategic CSR program successfully.

## 5. Case Analysis and Interpretation

The participants and organizations involved in the CAP program were encouraged to produce CSR projects of socio-economic value, dealing with issues relevant to the strategy

of the program and their contractual partners' core businesses in ways that are sustainable too for other stakeholders, such as the environment and community. Issues dealt with in the CAP program include sustainable development, clean energy, energy savings, efficiency, green technology, and innovation. In relation to CSR in the MENA, the case study sheds light on developments in the region that have not been previously addressed adequately in the literature. The case study examines a socio-economic youth engagement program that does not involve philanthropic CSR or charity and donations, which are often associated with CSR in the MENA region. On the contrary, it contributes to current literature by providing a case that involves strategic CSR. More significantly, on the implementation side of CSR, results from the case indicate that CSR activity can be efficiently project managed. The program engages UAE youth in CSR activity that is project managed to produce sustainable outcomes. CAP involved training the program participants in project management to achieve their project deliverables; this included project planning, design, conceptualization, monitoring, closing, bill of quantities, and procurement as some of the project management areas.

This CAP case study reveals the potential of CSR in the UAE to be strategic, socio-economic, and informed by a progressive attitude towards sustainable development. The case illustrates the benefits of project managing a year-long youth engagement program to serve society by transferring knowledge and skills as well as providing sustainable tangible results. It has also demonstrated the socio-economic features of project managing strategic CSR activities, by providing the organizations with financial and non-financial benefits such as actual returns on investment, cost-savings, PR, marketing, and probably some improved brand image. Furthermore, a problem with the available literature on CSR in the UAE and MENA region is not only that it is limited but also that CSR, especially during recent years, has become more significant to industry and business. The CAP case study on a strategic CSR program in sustainable development contributes worthwhile data and an example of more long-term approaches to CSR than have been reported elsewhere.

Based on examination of the case study, we can see that there have been developments in the area of CSR and sustainability in the UAE. The case illustrates a shift from the typical philanthropic CSR activity often associated with the region, to a more sophisticated socio-economic form of CSR. The project management approach adopted implementing CSR is also an indication to the developing CSR scene 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.

The CSR nature category comprises of CSR issues and CSR strategy. The majority of cases were identified as leaning towards the transforming and synergistic levels of CSR. This indicates that organizations with a transforming CSR strategy are more involved in issues such as operational impact, sustainability, and transparency rather than exclusively in charity or pro-bono community work. This provides some evidence of cases of strategic CSR existing in the UAE as opposed to the idea that CSR is largely philanthropic with no mention of more strategic approaches. Moreover, it is worthwhile noting that none of the cases in this sustainable development program were uninvolved in CSR despite the diverse differences in project issues and strategy. Thus, data from case study show that at least some CSR activity in the UAE is better thought out and strategic in nature than is often asserted. It might even be described as progress towards more significant change due to the number of projects in annual programs like CAP that adopt strategic CSR. Namely, sustainability programs like CAP place a strong emphasis on moving away from philanthropy towards a more sustainable form of CSR that achieves organizational goals and serves the community. Moreover, the CSR issues identified from these cases are more often related to organizational strategy and services delivery to the company and the community, rather than being somewhat isolated initiatives targeted towards compelling social issues. These cases have addressed CSR issues that emphasize operational impact and sustainability, again providing some evidence that CSR in the UAE is not only seen in

relation to charity and donations but can be seen to function in a strategic manner with an emphasis on contributing to both organizational and social goals.

Project managing CSR involves implementing CSR and project management categories. As illustrated, the cases are positioned in the top right section of the diagram, indicating a high level of project management. This shows some evidence that the CSR activity is managed, monitored, and organised through project management unlike claims made in literature implying that CSR in the region is misunderstood and poorly organized. Even so, there are organizations in the UAE that implement CSR through random activities, events, and voluntary hours, yet many of these are still project-managed, again illustrating a level of organization and management that has been under-acknowledged in current academic literature. Possibly, information on project managing CSR from the case study provides us with knowledge that could aid in successfully managing and implementing CSR regionally and globally.

Overall, the CAP program's projects indicated improved methods of managing CSR projects and sustainable development programs in the UAE. In all likelihood, there will always be cases that lean towards a more traditional view of CSR with a focus on charity and voluntary donations, nonetheless, the cases examined in the study show a commitment to the management of CSR activities, where simple and strategic CSR agendas can be implemented and managed as projects, programs, and portfolios.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The most significant finding of the CAP case study is the evidence of project management methods facilitating project teams' commitment to strategic CSR activity within a sustainable development program (Figure 2). A corollary of the strategic intent and achievement in CSR of approximately two thirds of the project teams (Figure 3) using project management methods to implement CSR, is the overall program management of CAP being actively supported by public and private sector organizations. In particular, our case analysis identified the significant roles played by government organizations connected long-term to running CAP, as well as to other programs for sustainable development. Further, the contracted organizations' leadership and involvement in individual CAP projects was a contributing factor to a significant proportion of the successful project processes and project deliverables. These contracted organizations provided a project scope and strategic orientation for the projects' goals and deliverables. Similarly, the participation and commitment of the project teams was critical to project performance and project success, and our interpretation is that the formal and informal CAP team member training in project management skills was essential for ensuring competent project execution. These factors contribute to ensuring that the inputs, processes, and outcomes of the CAP sustainable development program realizes strategic goals for individuals, organizations, and society. Such strategic management is atypical of many philanthropic activities in CSR and sustainability. These case study findings contradict over-generalization of the arguments and conclusions on philanthropy published in the academic literature on the UAE and MENA region [6,7]. In the CAP case study, there is evidence then that CSR in some organizations within the UAE is being implemented consistent with global standards such as those advocated by the UNDP and the UN Global Compact.

The institutional findings for CSR in the UAE provide insight into the way forward for achieving strategic CSR in the region. Government policies and support and organizational leadership by public and private sector corporations are important when adopting long-term, strategic approaches to CSR and sustainable development in the UAE [57]. The case shows that government/industry relationships can shape and drive CSR activity and sustainable development in organizations. Other studies confirm the potential influence of leadership by government organizations, as institutional drivers for corporate engagement in CSR ([58], p. 706). These findings contribute not only to the literature on CSR in the UAE and the region, but also are useful to the business management literature on sustainability and CSR projects.

Researchers have advocated more empirical analysis of CSR and programs involving alliances between firms, analysing the roles of industry leaders in developing new norms and maintaining long-term strategic CSR approaches ([59], p. 501). This study provides insight on the need for more concerted management of CSR and sustainable development through programs of projects. To increase the longevity and accomplishments of programs such as CAP, it is important that program managers and sponsors work together to maximise the opportunities for success in attaining strategic goals [60]. Sustainable development programs often will require long-term government policy commitment and must be often seen to be achieving valuable strategic goals by participating individuals, organizations, and communities. Our interpretation of the CAP case study is that it demonstrates CSR initiatives undertaken in contexts of sustainable development can be organized and implemented effectively through projects and programs [61–63]. It is evident from the academic literature that many initiatives in CSR in the past have waned after an initial period of corporate engagement and experimentation with collaborative, partnership, and alliance approaches. The CAP case study shows the importance of developing within participants in the program new values and norms that promote and increase commitment to CSR and sustainable development. It also draws attention to participants' dependence on achieving meaningful strategic goals for their continuing involvement and participation. Challenges will arise at many levels and if sustainable development programs are structured and managed long-term in multiple projects rather than left to be executed in more unorganized ways, there is more opportunity for continuing success [64–67].

We recommend that future research studies examine more project management initiatives in strategic CSR in the UAE, MENA region, and elsewhere. We have proposed a theoretical framework that assumes there are meaningful management associations between the respective levels and degrees of CSR, project organization, and sustainable development programs. We have drawn attention to associations between increasing levels of complexity of program management, sustainability management, project execution and delivery, and increasing levels of sophistication of CSR from compliance to strategic and transformational modes.

Future research should examine more closely ways that portfolio, program, and project management can be organized to be maximally efficacious for managing processes of strategic CSR and sustainable development. Moreover, broader-based quantitative studies in different country, organization, and individual contexts are needed. One fruitful avenue for future investigation would be to assess predictive relationships between strategic outcomes (in CSR and sustainable development) and their project management methods of organization and implementation. An acknowledged limitation of the theoretical framework presented in this paper is that it makes several general assumptions about the alignment of strategic project management with strategic CSR and sustainable development. More refined models and theoretical frameworks need to be studied that analyse different empirical contexts and assess the extent that such assumptions on strategy are found to hold. One area of corporate and societal importance would be to assess strategic alignment of CSR and sustainability across the project life cycle [68,69]. Our focus is on managing sustainability projects for social impact from a CSR perspective, and other perspectives are important, especially more community action-based approaches to sustainable development, particularly those that include some government and non-governmental involvement.

We conclude that more concerted implementation of strategic CSR projects and programs is a viable way forward for increasing sustainable development in the UAE and MENA region. The value of these collaborative projects was demonstrated through case study, and we recommend for future research an increased investigation of this organizational project approach to strategic CSR and sustainable development programs.

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