

## FARMERS' SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO LOCAL COMMUNITY: DOES EDUCATION MATTER?

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The agrarian discourse of social responsibility as a scientific paradigm is rarely addressed in research. Thus the problem arise how to apply the paradigm of social responsibility to the agrarian discourse so that it could help disclose farmers' social responsibility to local community and it's affecting factors. The aim of this study is to propose a methodology for assessing the social responsibility of farmers to local communities with regard to education and to explore further possibilities of its application. The research is based on original empirical data collected through structured telephone interviews from 1108 Lithuanian farmers in January-February 2017. The results of the study confirm that the agrarian discourse of social responsibility as a scientific paradigm is applicable to disclose farmer's social responsibility to local community with regard to education. Assessment of other factors affecting farmer's social responsibility is on demand for future research.

*Keywords: social responsibility, farmer, education, public goods, local community.*

*JEL Codes: H41, J17, M14, P25, R11.*

### 1. Introduction

The changing lifestyles round the world had been increasingly discussed in tight relation to the complex issue of social responsibility (SR). SR debates come after the phenomena of corporate social responsibility (CSR) from mid-fifties of last century (Bowen, 1953). CSR was expressed as a fundamental morality the way companies behave towards society. After years of debates whether company should have other responsibility but earning profits, social and environmental concerns came into business agendas in the name of CSR only after the growing pressure from civic society (Carroll, 2010). Throughout the several decades active NGOs made a significant impact in solving social, environmental and economic problems with help of various organized CSR activities and initiatives (Aras, 2010). Governments greatly accelerated CSR to come to national agendas throughout the Europe after issued Green paper for "Promoting a European framework for CSR" (COM (2001) 366).

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In recent decade SR had been increasingly recognized in the fields of rural development and agriculture, summarized under the term 'agrarian discourse of SR'. 'Agrarian discourse' is suggested to be an umbrella concept, which takes into account all types of activity in rural areas (agriculture-related and non-agriculture activity, i.e. services), that has impact on rural development.

Both scientific (Genier, 2008; Hartman, 2017; Hediger, 2010; 2013; Heyder, 2008; 2012; Maloni, 2006; Mazur-Wierbicka, 2015; Mueller, 2014; Tallontire, 2005) and political incentives, presented in the 2014–2020 and further Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), demonstrate the growing actuality of SR. The most evident SR agrarian discourse is related to public goods, provided by agriculture and rural areas. Over the last 60 years, due to the essence of public goods European agriculture and rural development programmes received an exceptional level of public support (European Union..., 2016). Some studies suggest applying SR as a toolbox for sustainable development (Mazur-Wierbicka, 2015; Leakey, 2017) or using it as a supplement or substituting concept for multifunctional and sustainable agriculture (Hediger, 2013). Based on latter suggestions, particular farmer's views towards SR might be helpful when applying for payments with regard to the CAP, since farmer's role in the region, its society development is vital and crucial (Obach, 2014). Still, there are no clear arguments in scientific debate whether it has any relation to farmers' education.

The main **purpose** of this study is to propose a methodology for assessing the social responsibility of farmers to local communities with regard to education.

To reach the aim, positivist **methodology** approach had been taken as a basis to perform the research due to the specifics of SR phenomena as proposed in methodologies applied in earlier SR studies. Scientific literature review and modelling methods suggested quantitative empirical study to be performed in finding actual evidence for solutions of defined scientific problem. Original empirical data were collected through structured telephone interviews from 1108 Lithuanian farmers in 2017. Descriptive statistical analysis and visualization methods were applied to organize the research results.

## **2. Theoretical assumptions of the research**

Scientific literature review suggests that the phenomena of SR use to be examined through numbers of theories and approaches. One of the possible views on SR seems to be promising in the ongoing discussion. The agrarian discourse itself suggests focusing one of the major concerns – the environment. Overview of possible SR theories and approaches helped find relevant environmental dimension in the Elkington's (1994) SR conception, which states the existence of three 'bottom lines' in any entity's activity as interacting system of three components: environmental, social and economic. The Elkington's (1994) conception is also known as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, the 3 'E's (Environment, Ethics/Social, Economic) or 3 'P's (Planet, People, Profit) approaches. These findings were further used to develop reporting and accountability guidelines in the field of SR such as Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, 2014), ISO 26000:2010 Guidance on Social Responsibility (2010).

Every component in the three-dimensional system plays equally important role with regard to CSR in any operating unit's activity. Every component consists of several areas in which particular entity demonstrate its responsibility. The balanced system of social, environmental and economic areas of SR aligned with stakeholder expectations more locally leads to particular operating unit's attitudes towards SR. These attitudes are demonstrated by operational actions in terms of particular socially responsible activities of an operating unit. Community welfare is found among the essential concerns of SR in social dimension. The ways farmers behave towards society in the region – local community – demonstrate part of their attitudes towards SR. From various sources of literature the list was formed of 12 socially responsible activities to be performed by farmers for society in the region. Theoretical modelling enabled modifying Elkington's (1994) three-dimensional conception of SR in composition with CSR managerial operationalization tools ISO 26000:2010 and GRI. It helped to compose original theoretical basis for a conceptual framework of farmer's SR research in terms of society in the region – local community involvement and development.

### **3. Research methods**

Positivist methodology approach had been taken as a basis to organize the research due to the specifics of SR phenomena as suggested in earlier SR studies and applied methodologies in the field. The developed conceptual framework is original, since it is composed in a different logical way compared to previous studies: it is context-specific and adapted specifically to measure farmer's SR in the community. To ensure the reliability of primary theoretical findings and eligibility of selected three-dimensional CSR approach, two-stage expert evaluation was performed. Aggregated expert evaluation results approved the eligibility of primary theoretical findings: the three-dimensional (social, environmental and economic) Elkington's (1994) approach towards SR is most suitable to apply for SR research in agrarian discourse. Further analysis helped localize the object-specific category of SR for society in the region in the social dimension of the TBL approach towards CSR. SR accountability and reporting tools Global Reporting Initiative (2014) and Guidance on Social Responsibility (ISO 26000:2010) helped with lacking description on range of socially responsible activities that might be implemented for community in the region due to the particular entity's SR in the name of local community involvement and development.

Quantitative empirical study was performed using semi-structured interview questionnaire with 12 options of possible farmer's socially responsible activities for local community involvement and development with five-point Likert scale. Original representative empirical data were collected by experienced research subcontractor under statistical conditions of 3 percent error ( $\epsilon=0.05$ ) and 95 percent ( $p=0.5$ ) confidence level is  $n=1059$  (Schwarze, 1993). Respondents were selected using systemic sampling of research subcontractors' database. Data were collected using telephone

interviews of Lithuanian farmers in January-February 2017. Potential respondents had been telephoned 3211 times, 1491 times without response, 612 farmers rejected the suggestion to take part in the interview. Finally 1108 interviews were found suitable for further investigations which satisfy defined statistical conditions. The obtained data was processed with descriptive statistical analysis using the SPSS 20.0 program.

The interviewed Lithuanian farmers represent all the municipalities of the country, different natural areas; reflect various farming conditions and the corresponding characteristics of farmers and farms: the gender, age, education of the farmer; size of farm, duration of farming activity, and type of farming (Agriculture..., 2016). The study involved 57.7 percent men and 42.3 percent women. The majority of surveyed farmers (38.3 percent) were respondents aged from 55 to 64; the second age group (27.6 percent) were farmers aged between 45 and 54, respondents of 65 years and older composed 23.9 percent. The majority of respondents (34.5 percent) had acquired professional education; farmers with acquired upper and secondary education composed respectively 23.7 percent and 21.4 percent. 88.4 percent of the surveyed farmers acquired education before 1990 (or in the Soviet period), 10.0 percent – before the Lithuania's accession to the EU (i. e. in the period of 1990–2004) and 1.6 percent in 2005 or later. By summarizing the general statistical characteristics of survey, it can be stated that the survey data is representative.

#### **4. Research results and discussion**

Research results gives evidence that Lithuanian farmers with attained higher education (university or college) are more favourable towards all 12 listed socially responsible activities with regard to local community involvement and development compared to less educated (secondary and primary education) farmers. “Rare”, “Very rare” and “Never” performed 12 socially responsible activities on average was named by 81.0 percent of primary, 79.0 percent of secondary and 68.3 percent of higher educated farmers. In contrast, 19.0 percent of primary, 20.9 percent of secondary and 31.7 percent of higher educated farmers named these activities as performed “Constantly” and “Often”. Several exceptional findings should be taken into special consideration and processed into deeper analysis and discussion due to the farmer's education as a defining factor for his socially responsible activities for local community involvement and development.

Aggregated research results reveal, that the top three positions, ‘constantly’ and ‘often’ performed by higher educated farmers for local community involvement and development, are found in the three main themes: first, keeping transparent and public-interest-protecting relations with local government (53.5 percent); second, taking into account the interests of local indigenous people when developing the farm (50.3 percent), and third, involvement in local community events and traditional festivals (48.6 percent). At the same time, these three themes had taken the most intensive rejection by primary educated farmers as ‘never’ performed socially responsible activities for local community involvement and development.

#### 4.1. Keeping transparent and public interest protecting relations with local government

The majority of questioned higher educated farmers defined the top important socially responsible activity for local community involvement and development as ‘constantly’ (26.0 percent) and ‘often’ (27.5 percent) kept transparent and public-interest-protecting relations with local government. It was observed, that the lower education farmer has attained, the weaker his attitudes towards this socially responsible activity are (see Figure 1).

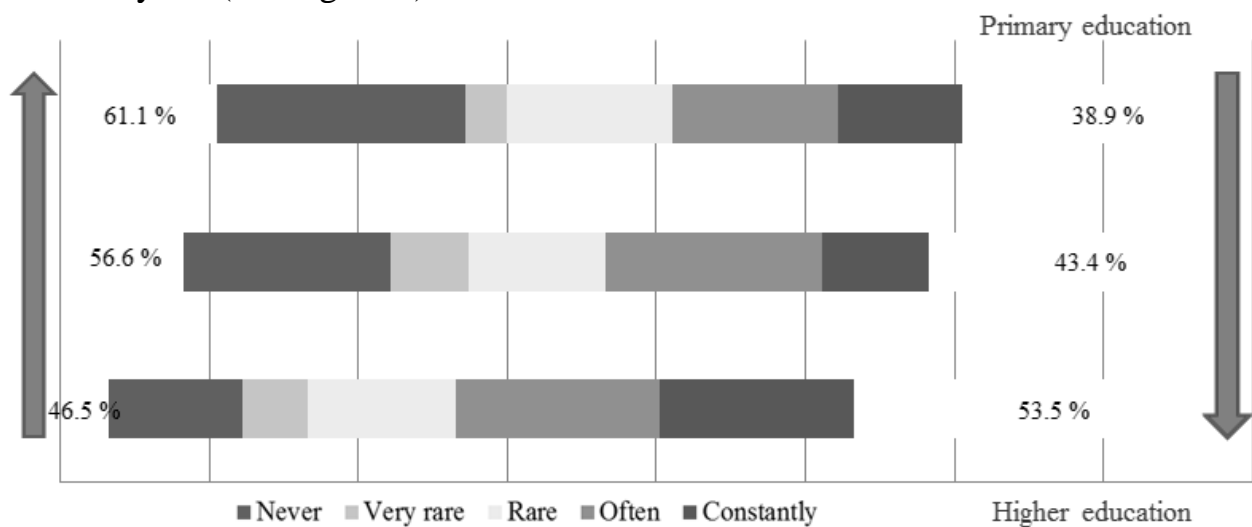


Fig. 1. Farmer’s education as his social responsibility defining factor in keeping transparent and public interest protecting relations with local government

This theme was considered as ‘never’ performed by one third of respondents (33.3 percent) with primary education and 27.8 percent respondents with secondary education and only 17.9 percent of respondents with higher education. It was also observed, that there is no relation between the level of education and ‘rare’ performance of this activity, since all three groups of respondents stated this almost equally (primary educated 22.2 percent, secondary 18.4 percent, higher 19.8 percent).

#### 4.2. Taking into account the interests of local indigenous people when developing the farm

Half of higher educated farmers (50.3 percent) during the interview responded that they ‘constantly’ (19.1 percent) and ‘often’ (31.2 percent) took into account the interests of local indigenous people when developing the farm. The second position in this theme was taken by farmers with primary education: ‘constantly’ was responded by 11.2 percent and ‘often’ – 33.3 percent. The third position in this case belongs to farmers with secondary education: accordingly ‘constantly’ (10.2 percent) and ‘often’ (26.7 percent). In this case, the biggest group of respondents, who ‘never’

did this socially responsible activity for rural community involvement and development, was composed of farmers with primary (44.4 percent) and secondary (40.3 percent) education.

### 4.3. Involvement in the community events and traditional festivals

The last position among the top three themes of socially responsible activities for local community involvement and development was found in the involvement in community events and traditional festivals. This theme was distinguished by nearly half of interviewed higher educated farmers as 'constantly' (16.5 percent) and 'often' (16.5 percent) performed, whereas 50.0 percent of primary educated farmers stated they never did that (see Figure 2).

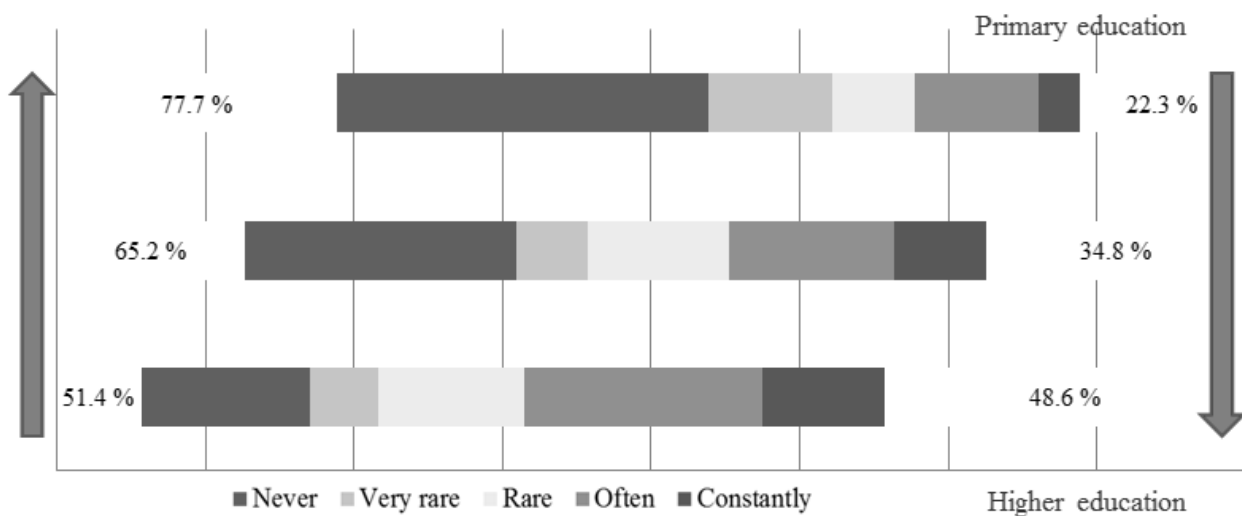


Fig. 2. Farmer's education as his social responsibility defining factor in the involvement in community events and traditional festivals

From the public good point of view it becomes evident, that higher educated farmers hold deeper sense of values related to keeping local culture and traditions as part of their identity in society they live and operate and thus prove the direct lineal relation between education and farmer's SR in community.

Research results also give evidence that among the least performed socially responsible activities for local community involvement and development, the last positions belongs to collaboration with various research laboratories and universities (12<sup>th</sup> position among all activities); provision of material support to the most vulnerable members of the community (11<sup>th</sup> position) and volunteering and encouragement of others to volunteer for the community wellbeing (10<sup>th</sup> position). It was also observed that more recently attained education correlated with more favourable attitudes towards socially responsible activities for local community.

## 5. Conclusions

1. The three-dimensional SR approach supported by SR managerial operationalization tools enables creating an appropriate conceptual framework and opera-

tional instrument to disclose the level of SR in particular area. However, it is necessary to adapt a list of socially responsible activities proposed by managerial operationalization tools to particular issue-specific context. Farmer's SR to local community is disclosed under 12 socially responsible activities for local community involvement and development.

2. Education was found as farmer's SR in the community affecting factor. In all 12 listed socially responsible activities for local community involvement and development education correlated with more active involvement and participation in community activities. It gives evidence that higher educated farmers are more socially responsible in their local communities compared to less educated. Thus education makes positive affect on SR in local community.

3. The logical structure and instrument of developed methodology is tested with representative sample and might be used for further scientific studies in the field. The methodology might be also applied as a supporting tool for rural development policy decisions, aiming to accelerate a more socially responsible and community-sensitive farming practices.

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## **ŪKININKŲ SOCIALINĖ ATSAKOMYBĖ VIETOS BENDRUOMENĖMS: AR IŠSILAVINIMAS YRA SVARBUS VEIKSNYS?**

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### **Santrauka**

Socialinė atsakomybė kaip mokslinė paradigma agrariniu diskursu tyrimuose socialiniams pokyčiams aiškinti naudota itin retai. Straipsnyje sprendžiama problema, kaip taikyti socialinės atsakomybės paradigmą agrariniu diskursu, siekiant, kad ji leistų diagnozuoti ūkininkų socialinę atsakomybę vietos bendruomenėms veikiančius veiksnius. Tyrimo tikslas – pasiūlyti ūkininkų socialinės atsakomybės vietos bendruomenėms vertinimo metodiką išsilavinimo veiksnio aspektu ir numatyti tolesnes jos taikymo galimybes. Tyrimas paremtas originaliais empiriniais duomenimis, surinktais struktūrizuoto interviu būdu 2017 m. sausio–vasario mėn. telefonu apklausus 1108 Lietuvos ūkininkus. Gauti tyrimo rezultatai patvirtina, kad agrariniu diskursu socialinė atsakomybė kaip mokslinė paradigma tinkama diagnozuoti ūkininkų socialinės atsakomybės vietos bendruomenei situaciją vertinant išsilavinimo veiksnį. Tolesniuose tyrimuose tikslinga vertinti kitus aktualius veiksnius ar aspektus, atlikti apibendrintą ūkininkų socialinės atsakomybės vertinimą.

*Raktiniai žodžiai: socialinė atsakomybė, ūkininkas, išsilavinimas, viešosios gėrybės, vietos bendruomenė.*

*JEL kodai: H41, J17, M14, P25, R11.*