

## **THE BENEFITS OF A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT APPROACH FOR MOROCCAN SMEs**

### **QUELS PROFITS POUR LES PME MAROCAINES A IMPLANTER UNE DEMARCHE DE DEVELOPPEMENT DURABLE**

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### **Abstract**

In recent times, Moroccan companies are facing increased scrutiny from a growing number of stakeholders who are closely monitoring the economic, social, and environmental impacts of their operations. Moroccan SMEs can improve their image, and that of their products, with their various stakeholders: present or potential employees, shareholders, NGOs, customers, suppliers, and local authorities, by reporting on their investment practices and choices.

**Keywords:** Moroccan SMEs; Social responsibility; Sustainable development ; Environment ; investment

### **Résumé**

Aujourd'hui, les entreprises marocaines doivent faire face à une plus grande attention de la part d'un nombre croissant de parties prenantes qui observent les impacts économiques, sociaux et environnementaux de leurs activités de manière critique. De plus en plus soumises aux exigences et au contrôle des consommateurs, des citoyens, des défenseurs de l'environnement, des promoteurs de normes sociales, en rendant des comptes sur leurs pratiques et choix d'investissement, les PME marocaines peuvent ainsi améliorer leur image, et celle de leurs produits, auprès de leurs différentes parties prenantes : collaborateurs présents ou potentiels, actionnaires, ONG, clients, fournisseurs, collectivités territoriales.

**Mots clés :** PME marocaines ; Responsabilité sociale ; Développement durable ; Environnement ; Investissement

## Introduction

Today, sustainable development is all around us. It is on politicians' agendas, as well as in mountains of investment and international organization programs. It is difficult to ignore some of its demands. As a result, in addition to consumers, various stakeholders are pressuring not only large corporations but also small and medium-sized businesses to adopt sustainable development strategies. These pressures stem either from a regulatory environment that requires the implementation of responsible processes or from the submission of companies in order to obtain a market seal of recognition. Furthermore, a corporation cannot be ethical, moral, or responsible solely through its legislation, rules, or processes. Corporate responsibility is a behavior that stems from the values of all the human resources that comprise it. Managers rely on corporate culture to engage the company responsibly in a sustainable development approach.

The governments of developed and developing countries, as well as NGOs and other public, parapublic, and private institutions, are no longer indifferent to the risks that our planet and its inhabitants face if the current rate of development continues to disregard the widely debated consequences. SMEs, which account for more than 90% of all companies in the world and 50% to 60% of all jobs, particularly in developing countries, cannot be ignored. Many companies have gone from words to deeds to translate this concept into added value for their organization.

In Morocco, the concept of “sustainable development” has established itself with a National Strategy for Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>. The latter provides several possibilities: “Green Morocco”, water, renewable energies, the Halieutis plan on the practice of biological rest and fishing areas, the “Visions” organizing tourism, the sustainable aspects of industrial plans, vocational and higher education courses, the role of municipalities, construction and housing, and finally the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), a sort of social ecology.

The puzzle of this article is, therefore, to demonstrate how Moroccan companies are today at the heart of sustainable development issues. Whatever their activities are, they consume natural resources, raw materials, water and energy, they use means of production and transport, generate emissions into the environment, and employ men and women. Their operation, their consumption, the life cycle of the products they manufacture, the services they offer, and the working conditions they offer to their employees, have significant social, environmental, and economic repercussions. Despite these major repercussions on the economy, on society, and on

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.environment.gov.ma/PDFs/SNDD-diagnostic.pdf>

the environment, Moroccan SMEs can contribute to the environmental problem and bring more solutions by putting their capacity for innovation to the benefit of sustainable development. The challenges of sustainable development are, therefore, not to be underestimated. Today we have young companies, Moroccan start-ups, committed to this path with the vocation of providing tools to enable the consumer and the citizen to organize their daily life around alternative solutions allowing them to act on environmental, social, or economic issues, and thus try to make everyone's actions always a little more virtuous.

This article aims to answer the following questions:

- How can the adoption of the philosophy of sustainable development benefit Moroccan small and medium-sized enterprises?
- How can they steer a sustainable development approach and ensure that the established objectives and desired performance levels are achieved?
- How do Moroccan companies contribute to sustainable development, from renewable energy-to-energy efficiency?

Furthermore, the goal of this study is to describe the role of Moroccan SMEs in the dissemination of sustainable development strategies and to identify the environmental forces that promote their adoption. It is also a question of defining the main difficulties that SMEs encounter in terms of sustainable development and suggesting solutions to overcome them.

### **1. The Mobilization of Moroccan SMEs in favor of Sustainable Development**

Globalization's effects, as well as the rise of civil society demands, have all influenced decision-makers to better take into consideration the challenges of sustainable development. Faced with a constantly changing environment that is inevitably leading to more responsible behavior, Moroccan companies of all sizes have had to adopt a new philosophy. This is based on the three areas of sustainable development activities listed below:

- Respect for the environment.
- Respect for employees, customers, suppliers, stakeholders, and society.
- The company's profitability, its growth, and that of the economy.

Recently, Moroccan companies are expanding their horizons beyond the interests of their sole owners and shareholders to include all stakeholders. Various entities exert weight on their strategies and thus belong, from afar or close, to their spheres of influence. They support the process of sustainable development because of the opportunities it provides, and because

poverty and exclusion constitute risks to both the company and the country (on local, regional, national, and even international levels).

Since the Royal Speech on the Throne Day on July 30, 2009, the Moroccan government has prioritized environmental concerns in all development initiatives. Indeed, Morocco is committed, under the leadership of King Mohammed VI, to a proactive multi-sectoral environmental approach based on public/private partnerships. All sectoral development projects are now part of a long-term environmental strategy that aims to protect resources and ecosystems, monitor the state of the environment in regions, improve citizens' living conditions, and implement operational climate change plans.

Morocco has recently developed a national sustainable development strategy<sup>2</sup>, with implementation beginning in 2017. To meet its national and international commitments, the government has developed a strategic reference document aimed at consolidating all public policies in terms of sustainable development and correcting institutional and regulatory dysfunctions. This is a profitable strategy insofar as its cost is around 2% of the GDP, but it will enable Morocco to gain 6% on the GDP. However, the implementation of a global responsibility approach demands from the leaders, managers of companies and other organizations, a change in their ways of thinking, deciding, and acting. It is a matter of being able to integrate increasingly broad and often complex issues expressed by all stakeholders rather than focusing on a single category of issues - in particular, the sole financial interests of shareholders for business managers. Beyond technical knowledge, managers are expected to develop new skills that allows them to communicate with a broader range of players in a critical and constructive manner in order to find innovative solutions jointly for the benefit of both business and society as part of a collective learning process. It is also necessary to strengthen the institutional and regulatory framework for long-term development, as well as the role of actors, control mechanisms, and economic and financial instruments, as well as to implement an environmental tax policy.

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<sup>2</sup> The strategy aims to strengthen the integration of environmental impacts into public policies in order to enhance economic growth and create sustainable green jobs.

Many companies of all sizes and sectors have responded to these new expectations by redefining their societal responsibilities and implementing initiatives aimed at protecting the environment, combating exclusion, or contributing to the local economy. Some companies have gone even further, changing their strategy, management practices, and even governance, often in the context of innovative collaboration with civil society representatives.

### **1.1 The Advent of the Sustainable Moroccan Company**

Modern Moroccan society is in the middle of many upheavals, and radical change is more needed than ever. Climate change, scarcity of natural resources, various types of pollution, erosion of biodiversity, but also increasing inequalities, and questioning of the global financial model: all these factors force us to rethink the functioning of many structures. These upheavals have an impact on companies of all sizes, including multinational corporations and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The fundamental objective is to lay the foundations for a green and inclusive economy in Morocco by 2020. The majority of policies provide for the principle of sustainability, even if their application remains insufficient, according to the diagnosis carried out by the Minister of the Environment. It was, therefore, necessary to define a global strategy setting the course for all public policies. As a result, a successful transition is based on mainly improving the capacities of the actors as well as the legislative framework, the control, and the effective application of the laws. The sectors are called upon to integrate the socio-environmental component into their roadmaps. Four fundamental pillars of sustainable development are proposed (economic, social, environmental, and cultural). At their head is the economic component. In this regard, the obstacles to competitiveness can be overcome through the systematic search for intersectoral convergence and better integration of socio-environmental considerations. For large companies as for Moroccan SMEs, each change has its keys and each challenge has its success factors. The changes imposed by the need for sustainable development are no exception. It is therefore needed to:

- Have a good knowledge of his scope of responsibility. This involves integrating the sustainable development strategy into the company's overall strategy, having identified the impacts of its products, and being able to measure their evolution.
- Ensure the consistency and alignment of the different systems and ranks within the company itself: shareholders, employees, suppliers, customers, civil society partners, etc.
- Be sincere in one's own commitment, convinced both of the need for change and of every action taken in one's name.

- Translating the commitment and the change in the offer and the nature of the customer relationship, in the nature of the relationship with the customer.

According to the strategy, real environmental savings are possible through the implementation of a circular economy or even green industrialization. The challenge is to be able to strengthen the consideration of environmental damage in public policies in order to consolidate economic growth and create sustainable green jobs (70,000 in 2020 and 250,000 jobs in 2030).

Moroccan SMEs combine innovation with a genuine economic and social vision in a variety of key areas such as communication, energy, and health, to name a few. It is no longer sufficient to recycle paper or avoid purchasing and manufacturing plastic bags; it is also necessary to take responsible actions a step further and integrate sustainable development and social responsibility at the heart of SME strategy. These actions represent more than 95% of our industrial fabric, employing more than 60% of private sector employees and being the source of more than 50% of national private investment, Moroccan Small and Medium Enterprises play a leading role in the Moroccan economy and can thus effectively contribute to stimulating the country's economic growth.

### **1.2 Moroccan companies with sustainable development strategies**

Moroccan companies that have implemented sustainable development strategies include for instance "Kilimanjaro Environment" and "Biolav". The heads of these companies are committed entrepreneurs, active participants in their communities, and providers of social utility. Youssef Chaqor and Karima Machhoub are two examples of young Moroccan entrepreneurs who are aware of the issues and various challenges that the businesses they create and manage must face.

A graduate of the Mohammadia School of Engineers, Youssef CHAQOR created his company by focusing his attention on an innovative project. He identified a number of trades in which he could possibly operate. Among them was the environment, in particular the recycling of used oils and their transformation into biodiesel. When it first opened its doors in 2008, "Kilimanjaro Environment" was the first Moroccan industrial company to extract fuel from collected used oils. In 2014, Tizi Awards honored this young entrepreneur in the Entrepreneurship and Innovation category. The following year, he was named an "Endeavor" entrepreneur, giving him access to a global non-profit network dedicated to supporting high-impact entrepreneurship. Kilimanjaro now has over 2,500 collection points for used oil from manufacturers, hotels, restaurants, and cafes. When an Italian biodiesel producer came to

Morocco looking for waste oil suppliers, Kilimanjaro was able to sign its first contract. The company quickly gained popularity on social media. It primarily exports to Europe, and the majority of its customers are biofuel producers or traders.

The liberalization of the petroleum products market in Morocco may allow for the local sale of biodiesel. This liberalization would allow the company to compete without having to go through the lengthy process of subsidization. Youssef Chaqor wants to build a circular economy out of the waste that is produced and consumed locally. He is relying on public transportation and waste transportation companies to use his biofuel, as well as state support, to ensure that his project runs smoothly. This young entrepreneur's initial goal is to create wealth while having a positive impact on the environment and the economy.

The big challenge for Karima Machhoub, winner of the *Maroc Entreprendre* network and founder of the startup Biolav, is convincing customers to have their cars or interiors cleaned without using water and using eco-friendly products. This young entrepreneur has created a viable concept. Amongst her regular clients are Menara Holding, five other SMEs in Casablanca, and approximately sixty other individuals. If the latter is not yet in favor of this type of service, companies such as Crédit du Maroc, which offers the Biolav service to its employees, are showing interest in negotiated rate agreements.

Companies, therefore, play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development. Tackling these issues affects positively their triple bottom line, which includes their financial, social, and environmental performance. Some of the actions taken by companies contribute to sustainable development and their triple bottom line. However, SMEs in Morocco face many challenges. On the one hand, it is threatened by the re-entry into force of a number of free trade agreements; on the other hand, it must comply with the new requirements dictated by the international community and the various stakeholders in terms of sustainable development. For many companies, the temptation to display an ecological or responsible positioning is great, especially in these periods of strong attention paid to the environmental issues of the planet. Carried out in a sometimes-clumsy way, this positioning is not necessarily effective, especially if the market aims are broad.

## **2. Challenges and Paradoxes of the Responsible SME**

Corporate responsibility particularly concerns the consequences and repercussions of its activities in its internal and external dimensions. In addition, the company must take into account all the consequences of its activities, whether by integrating all the risks sustained, that

is to say, has undergone or will undergo, and all the dangers it causes, whatever their occurrences or their severities. The business is then affected on the one hand by laws that directly concern its sector of activity and on the other hand by those that more specifically concern its national and international clients. This state of affairs leads it, willingly or not, into the path of sustainable development. It is a question of changing the modes of production of the industries and consumption of the customers to move towards a development allowing, on the one hand, the conservation of the natural resources, and, on the other hand, their renewal.

However, the environment is not the only concern of the government, which also aims to maintain the growth of the economy to ensure a certain quality of life for citizens. This set of circumstances raises the question of the will and the feasibility of implementing responsible actions on the part of SMEs. In fact, small businesses do not have the resources or the knowledge that larger firms have had to develop to meet their obligations, particularly since the adoption of regulations aimed at making the social and environmental consequences of activities of industrial groups more transparent. Especially since the corporate social responsibility movement cannot exist and continue without a critical mass of SMEs adopting this philosophy.

Even if SMEs are aware of their role in the field and show a desire to move toward sustainable development, implementing such a vision involves many obstacles, including a lack of financial and human resources, a lack of consumer interest, and a lack of time and means to learn about the implementation of responsible behavior.

All of these factors may lead us to believe that it may be more difficult for an SME to establish a functional sustainable development approach within its organization. However, the SME also has certain advantages in connection with the integration of such an approach. The simplified organizational structure of the SME allows it to integrate potentially its approach more quickly within its organization while more easily involving a larger percentage of employees.

When it comes to sustainable development initiatives, it appears obvious that SMEs do not operate in the same context as large corporations. The lack of financial resources, time, information, and skills are factors that particularly affect SMEs. On the other hand, it seems logical to think that the more a company grows, the more it will be inclined to be interested in general long-term orientations rather than to be interested in short-term constraints; long-term management being an element specific to the concept of sustainable development.

Although SMEs have their role to play regarding sustainable development, they are often shy when it comes to communicating their approach, especially to external stakeholders. Several SMEs are already doing, at their level, actions related to sustainable development or CSR without necessarily publicizing it as a strategy. Thus, because of their lower visibility, SMEs often suffer from a certain lack of legitimacy with their approach. Indeed, large companies have much greater visibility since they must assume their responsibilities under pressure from public authorities, the media, and various pressure groups.

### **2.1 Consumers' Attitudes and Behaviors**

Consumers have changed profoundly and with them, the demands placed on organizations. This is at least what a growing number of academic works and research reports suggest, which highlight the rise of environmental, social, and societal concerns among the public. According to these studies, the latter would no longer hesitate to penalize production or service providers who do not demonstrate their commitments to sustainable development. Nevertheless, more than their speech, their acts of consumption and purchase interest many business managers, because they are the ones that are transformed into turnover and market share. Are consumers really changing their buying habits and reflexes to incorporate sustainable concerns? How do these concerns affect the dynamics of consumer choice, in the face of considerations such as price, comfort, or practicality?

In fact, one of the poles of sustainable development is profitability, which mainly depends on a critical mass of consumers who have accepted its basics and who support its principles through their purchasing behavior. These consumers, who constitute an important market segment, can be influenced not only by government actions and by those of NGOs that encourage them to consume more responsibly, but also by an offer more focused on sustainable development. Despite the extraordinary progression of these enduring values, their translation into effective behavior necessitates qualification. Many low-income households choose food based on brand and price rather than intrinsic product qualities such as freshness, taste, safety, and product composition. As a result, the true place of sustainable and responsible consumption remains uncertain between wanting and purchasing power, between intention and effective behavior.

Many studies have been conducted in France, for example, with the goal of highlighting consumer opinions and behavior in terms of sustainable development and responsible consumption. These studies are intended for companies that want an operational tool to assess the potential of their offers in terms of "responsible" products or services and possibly expand

them by using communication vectors tailored to each of the audiences who are likely to be interested.

According to these studies, the French are primarily concerned about their environmental impact. Despite the context of the crisis, many of them would support more sustainable taxation. They would also be willing to pay more for ethical products. This demonstrates a genuine desire to change their behavior in favor of the environment. However, there are ethnocentric consumers who, if they are aware of social causes, seek personal benefits above all else, and egocentric consumers who are not aware of social causes.

In Europe, one in four consumers is influenced by the company's social reputation in their purchasing decisions. A recent study by the Research Center for the Study and Observation of Living Conditions (CREDOC)<sup>3</sup> reveals that almost four out of ten French people say they take into account when buying an industrial product, the citizenship commitments put in place by the company. However, these results reflect differences according to the level of education and income: almost half of the senior managers and higher education graduates, as well as 53% of households earning more than 3,000 euros per month show these trends. There is also a discrepancy between consumers' declarations of intent and their behavior. Indeed, 91% of French people say they are ready to boycott a product for any ethical cause, but only a quarter of them have already done so.

The first visible act of consumers engaged in their ecological concerns is to turn off the tap to save water. Formerly, this act pushed by reasons of financial economy is today a gesture motivated by the responsibility binding everyone to protect this increasingly rare resource. As proof of this empowerment, consumer behavior is also changing when buying a car. Once considered a mirror of social success and a vector of freedom, the car is gradually being abandoned in favor of other means of transport. Consumers now only see the practical side of the latter and integrate the environment into their purchasing decisions. Other evidence of consumer behavior change is the tendency to repair rather than throw away, to buy second-hand products rather than new or even the use of recyclable bags for shopping. The majority of French people, therefore, feel concerned by the impact on the environment, but not all. The passive and indifferent customer consumes systematically at the height of his means, the latter sees sustainable development as a constraint. Also seen as a fashion and eco-citizen acts, it

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<sup>3</sup>The Research Center for the Study and Observation of Living Conditions is a study and research organization at the service of actors in economic and social life. It analyzes and anticipates the behavior of individuals in their multiple dimensions: consumers, company agents, actors in social life.

doesn't seem to him to have a sufficient impact on his mobilization, and considers doing enough with the compulsory sorting of waste. However, sustainable consumer behavior is becoming widespread and is slowly becoming an ethical norm among the French.

## **2.2 The Growing Awareness in Sustainable Development Strategies**

In Morocco, there is a lack of information on the theme of SMEs and CSR and an absence of means and time necessary to carry out polls and surveys in the field. Despite the insufficiency of studies and surveys carried out in this matter with Moroccan consumers, it is clear that young people are increasingly aware of the necessity not to waste natural resources. They have a growing awareness of sustainable development and the notion of social responsibility. It is in this spirit that the Eco-School generalization program was presented<sup>4</sup> on Thursday, April 22, 2010, in Rabat, during the day of commitment, as part of the celebrations of Earth Day and of sustainable development. The objective of the project was to make education the foundation of any sustainable development policy, through the promotion of the right to the environment, the development of the capacities of citizens for the exercise of environmental duties, and the implementation of programs for awareness and education for sustainable development. Young people, customers, and entrepreneurs, who are becoming more attentive to these environmental and societal issues, increasingly share these expectations. They wonder more about their responsibilities and those of others. They assess their possibilities of action and reaction, become suspicious, and expect a firmer commitment from companies.

Moroccan businesses should pay attention to these demands and respond to them. This will become an increasingly important factor in attracting and retaining companies in relation to younger generations, both in terms of recruitment and development. As a result, economic and social performance will become increasingly intertwined and influenced by the positions that SMEs adopt on these issues.

The Moroccan SME is concerned about CSR, but it is not yet ready to take the initiative. This concept in search of universality is not transferable in all situations, and must therefore be corrected, and adapted based on context and situation. The stakeholders, particularly the public and private sectors, are in a waiting mode, but it is up to the state, with the possible assistance of international cooperation, to initiate the process. In fact, health, education, and peace are

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<sup>4</sup>The Eco Schools program is one of the flagship programs of the Foundation for Environmental Education. Today more than 60 countries in the world have adopted it. This international program aims to anchor environmental education in the school curriculum; it allows schoolchildren as well as the various actors of the school establishment to build a concrete environmental project for the place of life they share.

important dimensions of the concept of sustainable development, which frequently overlooks the imperative of social justice in favor of environmental aspects.

Active promotion of people with low incomes whose basic needs are frequently unmet is a critical issue in the long-term development of Moroccan society. If people with low incomes have such sensitive awareness, it is because business decision-makers confine them to the restrictive framework of people with low purchasing power. One of the Moroccan market's flaws is that it excludes insolvent people, effectively excluding a large portion of the population. However, one of the growth reservoirs for SMEs can be found in the vast market represented by low-income people.

Modern current societal changes are transforming our businesses and organizational methods. In terms of management, cooperation, and partnership methods, a committed Moroccan company is more multifaceted. This translates into managers who develop their capacity for conviction, influence, steering, and leadership, rather than just being managers. The challenge is to give meaning, to better understand and recognize everyone in their uniqueness and integrity, while also encouraging individual responsibilities in the service of the greater good. Management is responsible for promoting the company as a place where social ties based on human relationships can be formed. If the company has a purpose, it is to generate wealth.

However, it will also be required to deal with or respond to, organize, and intervene in a variety of fields. It will need to protect more employees that are vulnerable and work more closely with stakeholders upstream. It will need to be more transparent in its governance. Citizens, like company employees, seek meaning while retaining some degree of freedom. They want more freedom on the one hand, and more scope on the other. Companies are implementing new forms of work and collective expression to foster a sense of belonging and strengthen commitment and loyalty through all forms of communication and awareness-raising.

The sustainability of the activity must be understood as relative to its environment and therefore integrate the social, societal, and environmental responsibility of the company. Sustainable development is meaningful. Constituting the values of the company and its identity contributes to building a feeling of belonging. The notion of sustainability for the company is central. Sustainability concerns both the activity and the strategy, the employee, and the values of the company. Adopting a sustainable, long-term strategy means giving a vision to the company and therefore to its employees. It is this vision that makes possible the construction of shared values that constitute the culture of the company and therefore its identity.

## Conclusion

The increased awareness of environmental and social issues by the general public, political decision-makers, and businesses is an encouraging and positive observation. However, as is often the case with social phenomena, there is a risk of wanting to follow the trend. Nowadays, a company or a brand can easily display its green or social values or present itself as a committed or responsible player, without the content always following the form. Some fuel brands, for instance, rather awkwardly display an ecological positioning. The same is true for certain car manufacturers who set themselves up as models of social and environmental responsibility but whose reality poorly reflects their commitments. They are usually supported by advertisements that widely advertise their energy-intensive models. We are now witnessing a certain frenetic trend represented in the desire to appear as participants in sustainable development, pushed to the point of caricature, at the risk of seriously discrediting the underlying arguments and casting shame on sincere approaches. With the rise of important matters such as climate change, geopolitical instability, soaring commodity prices, the financial crisis, the emergence of new economic superpowers, sustainable development is, therefore, like the red thread of business management that can be the lever for sustainable growth as it is less harmful to natural resources, and richer in jobs. Managers aware that sustainable development is as much a threat as an opportunity for business, can rely on concepts such as competitiveness, differentiation, innovation, and tools such as certification and marketing, in order to put their business on the path to green growth.

CSR has different definitions depending on the cultural influences and the different societies in which it is forged. However, its evolution paves the way for its global application. In Morocco, it appears to be a reflection of environmental and social difficulties, as well as external pressures, that have led to CSR becoming an indispensable tool in business strategies. Morocco is indeed located in the MENA region, a region that, despite being the least polluting in the world with 4.5% of greenhouse gas emissions, will be among the regions most affected by the impact of these changes, particularly in terms of water resources already very limited.

Moroccan companies can no longer ignore the economic, social and environmental impacts of their activities on society. It is this link between the company and society that is embodied in the concept of commitment and relationship with stakeholders. Very present today in the life of Moroccan companies, and being the subject of new tools, CSR is a concept in full evolution. Far from referring to a set of fixed and identical specifications for all companies, CSR encourages companies to take a greater interest in the impact of their activities and to

develop common standards. It therefore contributes to making companies social actors in their own right, supported by their stakeholders, and whose responsibility and active role are recognized beyond mere economic performance.

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