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Beyond Merit: How Companies Navigate CSR to Aid the 'Undeserving Poor'

Eva Fuchsová[1], Jitka Laštovková[2], Michaela Jánská[3]

[1] Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, Pasteurova 3544/1, 400 96 Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic
✉ fuchsovae@g.ujep.cz

[2] Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, Pasteurova 3544/1, 400 96 Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic
✉ jitka.lastovkova@ujep.cz

[3] Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Faculty of Social and Economic Studies, Pasteurova 3544/1, 400 96 Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic
✉ michaela.janska@ujep.cz

Abstract

This study explores the role of merit within the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), with a particular focus on support mechanisms for individuals deemed undeserving of assistance by society. The primary objective is to examine the decision-making processes within corporate entities and non-profit organizations. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research reveals the cognitive processes of the participants involved. The study examines the legitimacy of target group selection, the importance of community engagement in local contexts, and strategies for communication support. The findings identify four distinct mechanisms through which companies provide support: via external foundations, the company's own foundation, employee volunteer associations, and consortia between companies and non-profit organizations. The study's findings indicate that these methods frequently intersect, collectively forming a comprehensive support system involving multiple stakeholders. However, the effectiveness of this system is contingent upon the presence of mutual consensus among its constituents.

Keywords

Undeserving poor, corporate social responsibility, philanthropy, non-profit organizations, qualitative research, CSR theory, mechanisms for support

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Introduction

The concept of merit in the context of societal aid, support, and solidarity frequently has emerged as a recurring theme in scholarly discourse centered on social policy and its underlying principles. Over the past two decades, this topic has been highlighted in discussions concerning the crisis and transformation of the welfare state and the limitations of its economic capacities.

The historical context of a post-communist society positions the Czech Republic uniquely, combining weak societal solidarity with robust social transfers. Consequently, certain target groups that are unpopular among the general public rely heavily on state support or public funds. This phenomenon prompts a salient question regarding the potential alternative financing sources that society might employ to support these groups in the event of a diminution in state assistance.

The objective of this article is to present the mechanisms of support for those whom society perceives as undeserving. A multifaceted approach is adopted, entailing the introduction of diverse viewpoints and a conceptual model of support mechanisms based on the relationships among specific stakeholders and the role of corporate social responsibility in this context. This analysis is grounded in qualitative research conducted among companies, foundations, and non-profit organizations.

The Theory of Deserving Versus Undeserving Poor

The present study is predicated on the theoretical differentiation of people in need between the so-called "deserving" and "undeserving" poor.

The study examines deserving and undeserving, making a distinction between the two and emphasizing the interactional nature of deservingness as the primary lens for judging individuals. These dynamics of judgment are often mediated by institutions, particularly the state, which wields the authority to define what is valuable and what is deemed inadequate or inappropriate (Franchi, 2023; Huzs, 2022; Streinzer & Tošić, 2022).

This differentiation, which corresponds particularly to the Anglo-Saxon cultural context, is based on the Poor Law issued in 1601 (Nicholls, 2017; Katz, 2013). The deserving poor, as defined by this concept, are typically considered the helpless, i.e. those who are incapable of self-sufficiency due to factors such as age or disability, and victims of natural disasters (Romano, 2018). Conversely, the group deemed undeserving of assistance includes individuals who have chosen a life of irresponsibility, leading to their own impoverished circumstances, or those who, despite having the means to be self-sufficient, choose to rely on welfare in an irresponsible manner. Their impoverished

state is attributed to factors such as indolence, negligence, and a proclivity for immorality or criminality (Katz, 2013).

Historian Katz (2013) demonstrates in his seminal study The Undeserving Poor, first published the in 1989, the societal fixation on attributing poverty to the perceived lack of diligence and competence of the impoverished. It is based on the fact that in the past, healthy men usually marginalized based on their race, ethnicity, or culture were primarily perceived as the group of the undeserving poor. Oscar Lewis's concept of the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1966) and the underclass theory (Murray, 1998), for example, approach the issue.

The response to the fundamental question regarding needs and merit is determined by the European welfare state and its institutions (Bridges, 2016). In the case of real social politics, the idea of the welfare state based on principles of social fairness, social solidarity, subsidiarity, and participation must be informed by the perspectives and behaviors of the populace (Lanford & Quadagno, 2021). Consequently, social policy is subject to pressure to curtail measures for groups deemed undeserving or uninvolved in the subsidiary network of the non-state social protection (Zatz, 2012). Another dimension of the welfare state crisis, the crisis of expenditures related to the change in the structure of the global economy, also means that it is necessary to seek funds other than public funding (Corle et al., 2021).

The general public's perception of the deservingness of social support for the impoverished is a critical factor in the willingness to support programs and strategies aimed at ameliorating their situation. Van Oorschoot and Halman (2000) propose a two-dimensional concept of the prevailing explanations for the causes of poverty. One dimension is represented by the individual – the social level – while the second one dimension is represented by the rate of fault on the accusation – fate axis. The integration of these two dimensions gives rise to four distinct explanations for poverty. The "individual accusation" explanation suggests that impoverished are responsible for their circumstances, attributing their situation to factors such as indolence, a lack of financial prudence, and moral deficiencies. In the case of the "social accusation" explanation, the poor are perceived as victims of a significant social injustice. The "individual fate" explanation means that the poverty is a result of bad luck, personal tragedies or divine disfavour. The "social fate" explanation sees the poor as victims of anonymous market forces, technological development, and global development (Oorschot & Halman, 2000).

In terms of value setting observed for Czech society as monitored by the European Value Study (EVS), there is a significant inclination toward individual accusation and a low level of solidarity. The proportion of the population attributing the responsibility for poverty exclusively to the individual has remained relatively stable from

the 1990s to 2008, with figures around 50% (1991, 51%; 1998, 45%; 2008, 47%) (Pakosta & Rabušic, 2010). In comparison to other European countries, the share of individual accusations was significantly the highest, and, at the same time, Czech society almost did not blame social injustice at all in comparison to those in other countries. In the last stage of EVS in 2017, respondents agreed that society is fair if it takes care of the poor and needy, no matter what they return to society. Even in this view of deserving the support, the Czech Republic is the nation showing the least solidarity in Europe (47% definitely agree. For comparison, e. g. Germany or Sweden 84%) (Atlas of European Values, 2021). The strict division of those who need help in terms of the level in which they deserve the support shows the difference between how respondents care about the living conditions of the elderly, the sick (35% and 32%, respectively), and the unemployed (6%) (Rabušic & Chromková Manea, 2018). Again, the interest in the unemployed is extremely low in the European comparison (Atlas of European Values, 2021). According to research, Czech society thus places great emphasis on individual responsibility for one's own destiny, and merit or "fault" is key for the solidarity of the Czech public.

This theoretical concept of equivalence among people in need reflects very well the willingness to help socially disadvantaged groups in Czech society. In 2014, the agency STEM/MARK conducted a survey focused on the willingness to support various charitable initiatives. The survey respondents placed the greatest emphasis on charity activities that assist children and disabled individuals, followed by the category of victims of natural and humanitarian catastrophes, i.e., the category of the deserving poor. Some 18% of respondents thought the support to socially disabled people was meaningful (STEM/MARK, 2015). In terms of the sources of the aid, the majority of respondents think that the state should help people in need (90%), and one-third of the respondents think that regions and municipalities should do so. Only 13% - 15% of respondents would hold entrepreneurs, affluent people, non-profit organizations and volunteers responsible for the support. Younger people preferred non-profit organizations and volunteers, while older respondents preferred entrepreneurs and affluent people (Čabanová & Tůmová, 2008).

CSR Theory – Legitimacy Theory, Stakeholder Theories

The voluntary activities of companies that exceed legal requirements are considered corporate social responsibility (CSR). In this domain, businesses must also factor need to take costs into account and therefore consider which programs to support and which not to support. The selection process differs, with some companies adopting an ad hoc approach to CSR, which, in practice, signifies that their decision is not a strategic one. Consequently, apart from the perceived sense of altruism, no tangible benefits are anticipated for the company itself. Other businesses consider a range of criteria to support activities and beneficiaries that are as consistent as possible

with the company's strategy to strengthen its reputation or market position (Hategan et al., 2018).

CSR can also be regarded as a means of attaining legitimacy. According to this theory, the continued existence of the organization is determined by both market power and social expectations, and therefore, understanding the wider public's concerns expressed in the expectations of the community becomes a basic prerequisite for the survival of the organization. The theory focuses on the assumption that organizations must maintain their social status by responding to society's demands and giving society what it wants. CSR plays a pivotal role in societal transformation by building the social identity of the brand together with the creation of the social ties of the brand and, thus, the involvement of consumers-citizens (Bhattacharya, 2017). Concurrently, this frequently signifies that, in order to maintain the legitimacy of the company's existence, only topics that have a positive or a neutral content regarding the company's activities are communicated externally (Raimo et al., 2021). As a part of their CSR strategies, companies typically implement socially responsible activities that are not perceived as controversial and whose ultimate beneficiaries are groups that are socially recognized as legitimate. However, these initiatives do not contribute to genuine social transformation; they merely perpetuate the status quo. In contrast, Parkers et al. (2010) propose that the collaboration between civic initiatives and public sector employees could serve as an effective mechanism for delivering the support to "underserving" individuals in need. However, this scheme is devoid of direct participation by commercial entities, although their involvement can be indirect. Either the participants among civic initiatives are also employees of some company and their private involvement in public beneficial activities is registered by their employer, or their activities serve as an inspiration for future CSR activities. A growing awareness among the general public regarding the significance of the companies' socially responsible role also serves as a catalyst for the companies to become more involved in this domain and to adopt a path of social innovation (Burchell & Cook 2006).

Another approach is to communicate with the company's most important stakeholders through social responsibility. Stakeholders usually include groups that have a contractual relationship with the company (employees and customers), public participants (government entities and non-profit organizations), and, last but not least, the local community. The extent of the company, the type of business activity, and whether its relationships are B2B or B2C determine the range of stakeholder groups. However, employees, the local community, and customers are considered the most crucial of them, irrespective of the particular characteristics of the market and of the company. Employee-focused activities have been shown to strengthen employee loyalty, reduce the costs of both redundancy and recruitment, and contribute to innovation (Stoian & Gilman, 2017).

In CSR stakeholder theory, socially responsible activities are considered to be a consequence of stakeholder pressure on the firm. The extent to which these activities occur is contingent upon the on strength, legitimacy and urgency of the stakeholder demands. The benefit of CSR activities aimed at stakeholders also has an additional positive spillover effect as it has repeatedly been found that investors include companies' interest in stakeholders in their decision-making (Mellahi et al., 2016). It is imperative to ascertain the most significant groups being influenced by the activities of a company and/or influencing the company. Different characteristics of such groups lead to conflicting demands from them, and a search for optimal stakeholder strategies able to solve this conflict has become an urgent topic (Weiss, 2014).

Stakeholders within the company are often customers and (prospective) employees. Furthermore, there are those who can influence the local government, which indirectly allows the company to establish good relationships with the local regulator (Stoian and Gilman, 2017). Sales of products and services are essential to success, so customers need to be considered in CSR (Li et al., 2019). If a company implements CSR activities that are positively perceived by consumers, it is possible to rely on the dispersed perception of customers, who often derive an overall positive attitude toward the company from the positive perception of partial CSR activities. However, this assumption cannot be fully generalized, as a meta-study has shown that the positive link between CSR and customer perception can only be verified in some socio-economic groups and is also geographically limited to advanced economies (Nurunnabi et al., 2018). Commercial benefits may be reduced by the insufficiently effective communication of CSR activities to customers (Rhou et al., 2016).

As mentioned above, the nonprofit sector plays a key role in providing corporate support to the "not deserving people in need" (Ehrenberg, 2017). When raising funds for the target group of the undeserving poor, the question is whether the more successful strategy is to present the quality of the nonprofit organization as such or to promote the issue itself.

According to Hibbert et al. (2007) and Cheung and Chan (2000), a nonprofit's reputation is an important factor in raising funds. Potential donors are willing to give if they perceive the organization as trustworthy and of high quality. The organization's reputation also strengthens donor loyalty, which is crucial given the limited corporate budgets for philanthropy (Ko, 2014; Gutiérrez-Nieto, 2010; Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007). However, self-promotion can also lead to a charity to focus primarily on its public image in order to gain marketing benefits (Silver et al., 2024).

Research shows that there is a better response to the promotion of a target group that is portrayed in a positive light with the same rights and capabilities as others in the population (Manzo, 2008; Lamers, 2005). It is more important to focus on the general

characteristics of the problem and the "face" of the problem that attracts attention through communication than on a detailed explanation of the problems of the beneficiaries or of all aspects of the activities of the nonprofit organization (Liu et al., 2016; Burt et al., 2009). In articles, the concept of the "face" that attracts attention probably reflects the social concept of "deserving" beneficiaries (Radley et al., 2010; Rosenthal, 2000), especially children whose presence evokes an emotional interest in commercial and social marketing (Deveaux, 2016; Dübgen, 2012; O'Dell L, 2010).

Describing a "face" for the undeserving poor could not be more complicated. Deacon (1999) states that it is crucial for successful fundraising to create images of support recipients that reflect common "victim" stereotypes and that evoke a willingness to donate. Other information that encourages potential donors to evaluate and address the problem with more consideration is the importance of the target group's story, i.e., the cause of the target group's emergence, rather than the current situation (Pope & Sydnor, 2011).

Social emotions also influence the decision to donate. Guilt is an important stimulus for pro-social behavior (Basil, et al. 2008; Hibbert et al., 2007). If it is possible to evoke emotions through communication with potential donors, then the act of donating appears to be a way to eliminate the guilt (Urbonavicius, 2019; Lwin, 2014; Hibbert, 2007). In particular, because related marketing is a convenient way to contribute in such cases (Pandey et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2013). It is recommended as a suitable tool, for example, for drug addiction campaigns (Duhachek, 2012; Agrawal, 2010;). Thus, it can be said that the communication of nonprofit organizations is absolutely crucial for obtaining funds (Petty, 2018; Teeny, 2017).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen to conduct research on support mechanisms for the "undeserving poor," which can better reveal how social participants think about the issue, their understanding and interpretation (Silverman, 2017).

The following groups were selected as examples of socially unacceptable "undeserving poor": the socially excluded, people with addictions, the homeless people, the Romani, and people released from prison (inspired by Katz, 2013).

The research sample was selected on the basis of a combination of expert selection and responses to a short questionnaire distributed by e-mail, surveying the experience with private funding/support of socially unaccepted groups among nonprofit organizations/companies declaring cooperation with this type of nonprofit organizations. Subsequently, all organizations/businesses with this experience and willing to collaborate in the research were contacted. Six semi-structured interviews

were conducted with representatives of non-profit organizations and six with representatives of companies that apply CSR to support socially excluded groups. The data were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with representatives of two foundations (one of which was a corporate foundation).

The research used a combination of two data collection techniques: a short questionnaire, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted face to face, by phone or Skype. The information obtained was supplemented by an analysis of documents, especially annual reports.

Questions for interviews with business representatives were focused on the reasons that lead them to support socially excluded, "undeserving" groups, possible limitations of the support, the media coverage, and the link to corporate CSR strategies. Questions for representatives of non-profit organizations primarily focused on the willingness of companies to support the above-mentioned groups, strategies for attracting such support, and reflecting on changes in the situation over time. All respondents were made aware of the purpose and objectives of the research and how the information they provided would be used, and they gave informed consent to be interviewed. To maintain anonymity, companies (including the corporate foundation) were assigned a number from 1 to 7 and nonprofit organizations (including the second foundation) were assigned a letter from A to G (see Tables I and II in the Appendix). The tables also show the basic characteristics of the organizations surveyed.

All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and then coded. Thematic analysis served as the basis for data interpretation for both documents and transcribed interviews (Silverman, 2017; Kaufmann, 2010). The list of key categories created from the codes based on thematic analysis is shown in Figure 1.

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The following groups were selected as examples of socially unacceptable "undeserving poor:" the socially excluded, people with addictions, homeless people, the Romani, and people released from prison. Based on the selection of experts and answers to a short questionnaire distributed by e-mail, 6 interviews were conducted with representatives of non-profit organizations and 6 with representatives of companies applying for CSR to support socially excluded groups. The information was supplemented by interviews with representatives of two foundations (one of which was a corporate foundation). To maintain anonymity, companies (including the corporate foundation) were assigned a number from 1 to 7 and nonprofit organizations (including

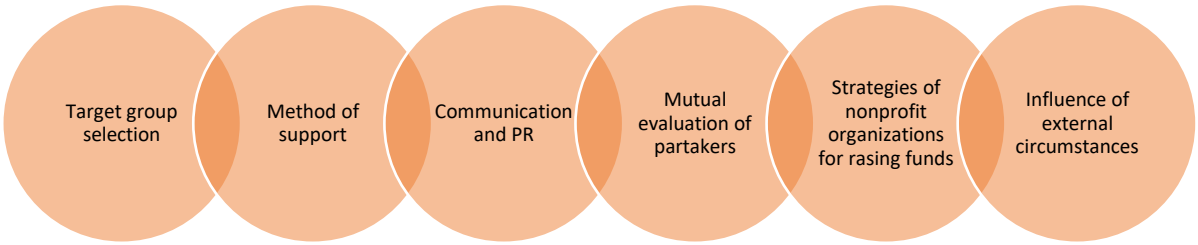
the second foundation) were assigned a letter from A to G (see Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix). The tables also show the basic characteristics of the organizations surveyed.

The research used a combination of several data collection techniques: a short questionnaire, document review, and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, by phone or Skype. They were always recorded and then transcribed. All interviewees were made aware of the purpose and objectives of the research as well as how the information they provided would be treated, and they agreed to be interviewed. The information obtained was supplemented by an analysis of documents, especially annual reports.

Questions for companies were focused on the reasons that lead them to support socially excluded, "undeserving" groups, possible limitations of the support, the media coverage, and the link to corporate CSR strategies. Questions for nonprofit organizations focused on the willingness of companies to support the above-mentioned groups, strategies for attracting such support, and reflecting on changes in the situation over time.

All interviews were coded, and categories were created from the codes based on thematic analysis (Silverman, 2017; Kaufmann, 2010). The list of key categories is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Core categories*



Source: Authors' research.

Findings

Legitimation of Target Group Selection

"Popular explanations" of the causes of poverty as identified by Mareš and Pakosta (2010), and the perception of a moral entitlement to support are very well reflected in the responses of representatives of non-profit organizations. They agree that the fact that target groups they focus on are not popular among the general public, and it was not easy to get support for them.

But by labeling this group by the majority of society is what it is, and it is very hard to defend it. If a person does not go deep, then they see it very clearly – these people do not deserve it, they can only blame themselves, why should we help them, they should help themselves. (Organization F, hereinafter referred to as letters, see Table 1)

The answers in the interviews also fully reflect the reality, which is illustrated by the results of public opinion polls of the Czech population (CVVM, 2020), which clearly show which groups the respondents feel the greatest social distance from. In the first three places, we find the above-mentioned target groups: drug addicts (86% of respondents would like to have them as neighbors), people with a criminal record (71%), and people addicted to alcohol (69%) (CVVM, 2020). Romani people are not explicitly included in these surveys, but living with them is rated as "bad" by a total of 72% of the population, and even assessed as "very bad" by 24% (CVVM 2019).

The perceived social distance is reflected in the willingness to help. The STEM/MARK agency measured the willingness to support various charitable activities in 2014; only 18% of respondents described helping the socially disadvantaged as meaningful, while projects that help children and the physically and mentally handicapped were perceived as the most meaningful, followed by victims of natural and humanitarian disasters, i.e., the category of the deserving poor (STEM/MARK 2015).

In line with this logic of legitimacy, representatives of the non-profit sector perceive the position of their clients in relation to other groups because resources are limited, and it is necessary to "compete" for them. The opportunities of these target groups are significantly limited, because they are perceived as undeserving in comparison to other needy groups.

A lady who is in charge here came, and we discussed our services. She supports that disabled people sounded good and that the asylum house, it would be difficult to push it through their board of directors. When she defends it before the board, it is a lot easier to defend children or disabled people. It is "such a nice target group" as we say. But if she would come up with homeless people there... (F)

On the other hand, representatives of the companies contacted denied any selection of target groups based on moral criteria or equality. This was because the companies actually supported these controversial groups.

So, we didn't really have it, or we didn't limit it in any way. We have always really wanted to help in all those areas where there is a problem. (*Company 1, hereinafter referred to as numbers, see Table 2*)

Pillars of support can become tools for this exclusionary strategy. Companies determine these pillars based on certain criteria.

Our company primarily supports projects with a charity focus (children, disabled people, the elderly – highlighted by authors), projects focused on the environment (nature, animals), culture (theatre, dance), and sport (young athletes, the sport activities of our employees). (4)

…because we have our four areas where we can be active. And that's where we are active. (5)

The approved CSR philosophies of individual companies often determine the stringency of such restrictions and define the options available to participants. Given that the concept of corporate social responsibility as a voluntary corporate involvement in social issues is also seen as a tool to improve corporate image, it is understandable that companies seek to engage in non-controversial issues as other work focusing on the legitimacy theory has shown (Raimo et al., 2021). Companies are motivated to implement CSR activities not only by the expectations of customers or the general public, as the direct effects of social responsibility are recorded among employees (Stoian and Gilman, 2017). If a company decides to focus on less popular issues, it is necessary to consider the attitudes of employees. One of the companies noted a partial dissatisfaction among employees with the selection of supported projects that went to socially excluded localities, which led to considerations about changing the solution. The result was a compromise: maintaining the current system and allocating part of the funds to be decided by the employees themselves.

The Local Perspective and the Importance of the Community

According to the informants, the region, i.e., the support of the community in the place of business, seems to be a relevant (and de facto almost universal) aspect when companies decide to support excluded groups. This is true both for direct support of some projects and for the decision to use an independent foundation for the support. This finding is consistent with the findings of stakeholder theory, according to which targeting CSR to the needs of the local community is the predominant criterion, regardless of the company's overall strategy or size (Stoian & Gilman, 2017).

But in fact, what was 100% clear to us from the beginning was that we want to help in the region where we are active. (1)

According to the statements, the reasons may be the local patriotism of the company's management, respect for the employees who come from it, and being one of the basic principles of CSR.

Focus on the region where we live... we operate here, we live here, and we actually want to give part of our success back to the region. (3)

And these are also the principles that nonprofits expect when they turn to companies for support.

... so, it should be, for instance, companies which are active in close proximity and have some experience with the issue. (C)

Territorial affiliation thus appears to be an important consideration in the decision to support groups that may be perceived as controversial in other respects. Such a perceived responsibility implies both accepting all the problems that arise in the territory and contributing to their solution. Reframing the issue and drawing attention to the regional rather than causal definition seems to be beneficial for both corporate and nonprofit representatives. The stories thus become "socially acceptable" for all.

The Strategy of Nonprofit Organizations

In an effort to raise funds, nonprofit organizations choose different ways to reach potential donors. Our research shows that nonprofits use personal acquaintances, long-term relationships, and the associated good name of the organization, or an approach to the issue through the story to attract and communicate with these donors. The interviews also revealed an innovative strategy of using positive stereotypes about the target group.

One option that can be described as intuitive rather than strategic is the use of personal acquaintances, i.e., the social capital of the members of a nonprofit organization.

It is a lot about personal relations. There are about 23 people working here, and 30 people used to work at the branch here with us, so everybody still knows somebody... So, they donated through such relations. (A)

Traditional long-term cooperation and thus a positive image of a nonprofit organization with a donor company, are other ways to build mutual communication, as e. g. Hibbert et al. (2007) point out.

We usually have sponsor donations from companies; we have certain cooperation with them. We are trying to address firms who know us already, delivered something to us, medical material or something. They give us goods you need for the provision of the service, however, they sometimes donated money and that's about it. (B)

Nonprofit organizations still see a personal story as an effective tool for communicating with the general public. Strong emotions associated with moral beliefs about the need to help also enter into communication through a strong story. Evoking

compassion or guilt is an important stimulus for social action by the public, as Basil et al. (2006) also point out.

We also had a moderated discussion when the homeless people told their destinies, their stories. That's what appeals to those people when it's a specific story and face, so it's different than when you're talking about some homeless people. (F)

Another option that can be considered thoughtful, strategic, and yet quite innovative is to use positive stereotypes about the audience when communicating with potential donors.

It is about music and culture, it also has a multicultural overlap, we want to attract the public, which often recognizes Romani music, perceives it, it would be a space for the presentation of Romani culture, the community specifically… This works for making that wider contact, and that it's such an easy way, and at the same time, once the communities get together, there's work to be done. We believe it has potential. (D)

The conceptual approach to communication is more effective (Pillai & Hofacker, 2007; Roy & Cornell, 2004). However, a number of studies show (Ko, et al., 2014; Gutiérrez-Nieto, 2010; Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007) show that the knowledge and skills that organizations have in this area are not sufficiently professional. The organizations we contacted chose rather random or traditional methods but in the interviews we were also able to identify an innovative strategy that originally worked with the history of the group.

Mechanisms for Support

The companies' support is delivered to selected target groups through various mechanisms. With the exception of one company, the rest of the companies surveyed choose an indirect method of support. This means that at least one intermediary is involved in the process. For example, one such support mechanism was described in a study focusing on the social rehabilitation of ex-convicts (Parkers et al., 2010). Again, the spillover effect was found where the primary driving force was not a business entity, but rather the nonprofit sector or company employees who were simultaneously engaged in social work.

All of the companies surveyed involve their employees in the process of selecting projects to support, and only a few of them also reflect the opinions expressed of the general public.

Our employees join activities we prepare for them. They can discuss non-profit organizations (if they have some, or help in some), they can talk about the grant programs, but we also prepare activities they can join themselves. (2)

According to a number of authors, employee participation is a common practice (Flammer & Luo, 2017). The selection of supported activities and employee participation can take different forms. Theory suggests that employees themselves, through their own involvement in volunteering, can be an inspiration or even a driver of corporate social responsibility, especially when it comes to issues that have been neglected so far, which is one way to achieve social innovation (Burchell and Cook, 2006). At the same time, however, it turns out that the attitudes of management and ordinary employees are not always the same when it comes to the choice of issues to be supported.

Four different mechanisms A-D were identified in the surveyed sample.

(A) Support with the Help of a Foundation

Companies no. 1, 3 and 4 carry out their support activities with the help of a foundation that manages many other company funds. Employees can also influence the selection of supported projects. Companies no. 3 and 1 allocate some funds to activities proposed by their employees. Employees often participate in these activities. The entire selection process is managed by Foundation E. Its priorities are determined based on ideas from the nonprofit sector and the general public.

Well, we have cooperated with (non-profit organization) E for four years, and we decided to start the cooperation because… we have been addressed by many (organizations) asking us for money … And we have fought with that, and, simply support, we did not know… if what we did, if we did it right. (1)

A similar model of the cooperation of a company working with an organization that manages its philanthropic activities is one of the possible partnerships described in articles (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b).

(B) Own Corporate Foundation

Large company no. 6 has set up its own foundation. Some of the foundation's funds are allocated on the basis of employees' proposals, and some of the funds are allocated on the basis of proposals submitted by the general public.

And that's basically a fundraising event among employees. They collect the money among themselves, and the foundation doubles the sum… and we now see the benefits of this mobile application. People (the general public) perceive this very positively, and we show where we are putting the money. People themselves are partakers by assigning points to particular organizations. (6)

According to Válová and Formánková (2014), a similar strategy is also chosen by other large companies in the Czech Republic.

(C) An Association of Employees

A higher rate of employee initiative was registered for company no. 5. Its employees have initiated the creation of a voluntary association that negotiates beneficial projects with nonprofit organizations and the company's management.

… the association has its own identification number, we have our money provided by the employer… so we, when we focus on the areas, we are active in, we buy everything for ourselves… they do not contact me personally, charities, etc., but I push them: let's do an event… we are still motivating them. (5)

Intensive communication between both parties, ensured by corporate volunteers is a necessary condition for efficient volunteering that can be in line with the interests of both companies and nonprofit organizations. This is also confirmed by the conclusions of a paper published by Roza et al. (2017).

(D) Venture of a Company and a Nonprofit Organization

Company no. 7, in cooperation with several non-profit organizations (including non-profit organization F), has established a platform for the integration of homeless people. The goal of the participating organizations is to find and prepare suitable people for participation in the project. The company then provides social rehabilitation, including the provision of jobs. Employees of company no. 7 are re-involved in the activities. This form of social innovation has been called social entrepreneurship. It is characterized by an approach that goes beyond the usual cooperation of different entities. It has the ability to provide universal solutions to social problems (Tracey & Scott, 2017).

In addition to the above-mentioned methods of support, where the final beneficiaries are the so-called underserving poor, we have also identified a mechanism whose immediate goal is to improve the professionalism of nonprofit organizations in the segment of fundraising. Company no. 2 enables non-profit organizations and foundations to participate in educational programs aimed at improving their competitiveness and ability to successfully raise funds for their activities.

… they have won a grant for the improvement of professionalism in this segment… we are trying to teach the non-profit organizations to be able to raise funds by themselves, promote themselves and operate well, and we have the corporate know-how, and we have experts, so that's why we are providing them with this option. (2)

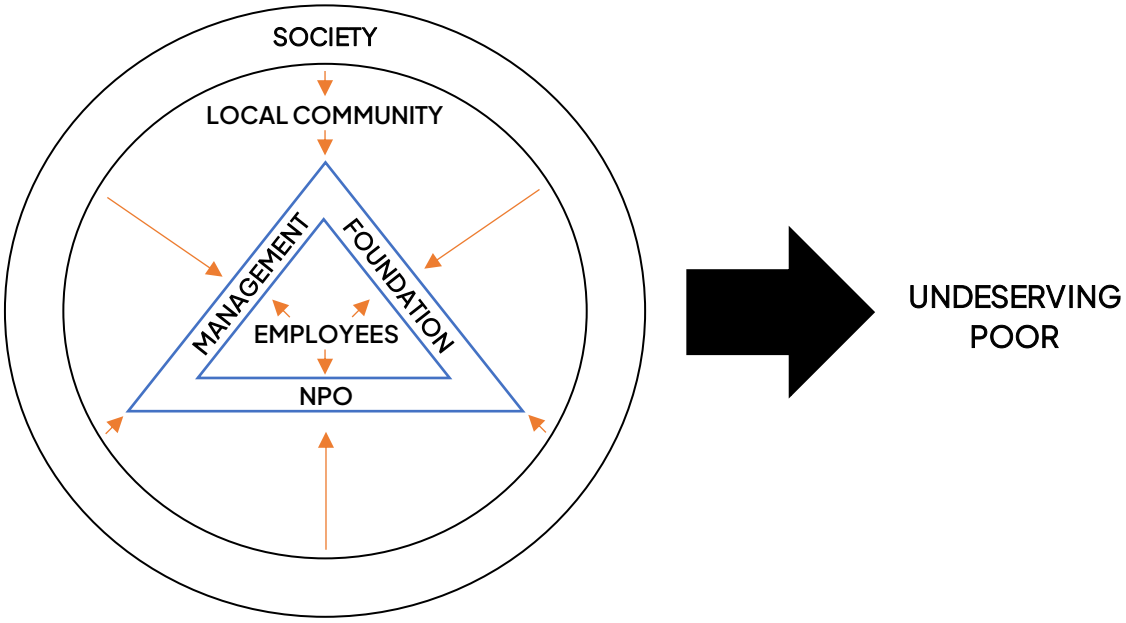
The sample of companies surveyed showed different ways of providing support to the target groups, reflecting different levels of willingness to get personally involved in the problem. The provision of the support with the help of a foundation or a nonprofit

organization is the simplest option and also the one most used by the participants in our survey, while social innovations that lead to the actual solution of social problems, mainly in the form of the partnership between the private and nonprofit segments are at the top (Carrasco and Buendía-Martínez, 2016). The last two examples described, both an employee volunteer organization and a consortium of companies and nonprofit organizations, can be considered as examples of such an approach.

The Synthesis of Support Mechanisms

The scheme presented synthesizes the identified mechanisms of support for the undeserving poor (see Figure 2). At the center of the diagram, there are employees who can be identified as a key group because they propose activities to be supported to employers and/or foundations (in the case of a foundation, a corporate foundation), participate in the implementation of the supported activity (in the case of a foundation, consortium and a nonprofit organization), and initiate a nonprofit organization to solve a social problem themselves (in the case of an employee volunteer association). The role of management, the foundation and a nonprofit organization is to select issues for support based on the situation (social problems) in the local community. They are, therefore, the main implementers of the support, and they must consider not only the needs of the target group (often defined with the help of the foundation or the non-profit organization) but also the attitudes of the employees in their decision-making process.

Figure 2: *Mechanisms for Support*



Source: Authors' research

All of this is framed by the situation of the local community, the priorities, attitudes and expectations of its members, but also by the norms of society as a whole (including

the establishment of a social network). The actors involved in the support perceive and reflect this social context. Thus, participants are involved in helping to support the underserving poor, so these are support mechanisms linked to a number of stakeholders, and they can only work if there is a degree of mutual consensus, rather than individual "philanthropic choices".

Discussion and conclusions

This article provides an analysis of corporate funding strategies for the needs of social groups that are generally disregarded by the public. This topic is closely related to the field of economic policy, particularly with regard to the exploration of alternative financing mechanisms for social needs and marginalized groups that have traditionally been supported by the state. The paper addresses the problem of low solidarity in society, which affects the allocation of resources and the legitimacy of target groups. As a result, corporate support through CSR serves to reinforce government policies on social welfare, particularly in the context of reducing public spending. The mechanisms of corporate and NGO involvement also reflect regional development policies, whereby support for local communities contributes to the improvement of social and economic conditions in regions. In a broader context, this issue is linked to social policy reform and the search for sustainable models for financing social needs outside the state budget. A survey of companies that support these groups and nonprofit organizations that focus on them has identified a wide range of possible solutions proposed by both parties.

Nonprofit organizations find the decision to support a controversial target group in need of social assistance as particularly challenging, given the low social solidarity in the Czech Republic towards the "undeserving poor." They agree that it is more difficult to raise funds from companies for these groups than for those whose needs are considered more legitimate. Consequently, the selection of such target groups effectively puts them at a disadvantage in the competition for private funding. In addition, their strategies for engaging corporate donors often rely on serendipity — leveraging employees' social capital — rather than on a deliberate approach or strategy. Storytelling plays an important role, emphasizing the underlying causes of the problem rather than the current situation (Liu et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there are examples of innovative approaches that use positive stereotypes associated with the target group.

Czech companies' approach to social responsibility has changed significantly over the past decade. Occasional philanthropic activities are no longer considered synonymous with corporate social responsibility (CSR). This shift is confirmed by the criteria for winning widely recognized CSR awards and the growing number of companies participating in such competitions each year.

There are also differences in the perception and acceptance of different monitored groups. The increasing willingness of companies to participate in the rehabilitation of homeless people or people released from prison in recent years is significantly influenced by the low unemployment rate and high demand for labor in the Czech market.

A common and effective stakeholder strategy is to reframe the needs of the target group. For companies, foundations, and nonprofit organizations, a regional definition of support is advantageous. Framing support for excluded groups as support for the region and the community benefits all stakeholders. Companies that have provided assistance to these groups report that there are no barriers to targeting; their decisions are based on need rather than merit. This approach leads to a potential systematization that can be integrated within the framework into CSR strategies.

For companies that support these groups, the need to "legitimize" their decision in the eyes of the general public is less critical because they are often business-to-business (B2B) companies or have a dominant market position. Consequently, the public presentation of these activities is not a primary consideration. Notably, the role of the state was not mentioned in the interviews; the perception that the state has not done enough in this sector did not motivate their actions. Therefore, the legitimacy of the decision is an aspect of internal communication within the companies, with employees playing a crucial role in the decision-making process.

Each support solution identified is based on theoretical concepts; however, participants tend to choose proven methods over original approaches. All social actors prefer a non-provocative narrative and mediated engagement—favoring financial support over personal involvement and knowledge sharing—rather than pursuing revolutionary social activism. Nevertheless, there are emerging, albeit isolated, shifts in this thinking.

It can be concluded from the above that in order for companies to become more involved in supporting socially marginalized groups, the following recommendations can be made to companies: cooperate actively with the nonprofit sector in developing CSR strategies; involve employees in the decision-making process for supporting selected projects and offer them volunteer opportunities; support the professionalization of nonprofit organizations by training programmers and sharing know-how. It is recommended that NGOs use strategic, story-based communication and take into account the regional context in order to tailor support to the specific needs of local communities.

We acknowledge that the chosen research strategy has its limitations, either because of the small number of participating companies or because the sample

included only companies that actively support the aforementioned groups and thus become part of the solution. Future research would benefit from examining a broader context for the decision-making process, such as the evolving roles of the state and private donors. In addition, exploring how companies that do not support these groups perceive the issue and the rationale behind their positions would provide valuable insights.

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Appendix

Table 1: *Nonprofit organizations surveyed*

Index	Target group	Coverage
A	Socially excluded	Local
B	Addicted	Local
C	Socially excluded	Local
D	Romani people	Regional
E	Foundations	Regional
F	Homeless	Local
G	People released from prison	Nationwide

Source: own research

Table 2: *Companies surveyed*

Index	Target group	Coverage	Size by number of employees in 2020
1	Chemical industry	B2B	Large company (approx. 19,000 employees)
2	Banking sector	B2C; B2B	Large company (approx. 8,000 employees)
3	Engineering industry	B2B	Large company (approx. 600 employees)
4	Automotive	B2B	Large company (approx. 900 employees)
5	Banking sector	B2C; B2B	Large company (approx. 3,000 employees)
6	Corporate foundation	B2B	N/A
7	Electrotechnical industry	B2B	Large company (approx. 12,000 employees)

Source: own research