

# From Tradition to Recognition: Exploring pre-1989 CSR in Slovakian Agriculture

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**Abstract:** Paper aims to investigate the socially responsible activities undertaken before the political changes of 1989 using the example of JRD Krajné, Slovakia. By examining their CSR practices, the study sheds light on the organic development of responsible business initiatives within the region's business culture at the time and provides insights for businesses across sectors to incorporate responsible practices into their current operations. Structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method, with Ing. Vojtech Tíčík, the former chairman of JRD Krajné, serving as the interviewee. A set of 11 open-ended questions captured insights into the cooperative's socially responsible activities before 1989. The results reveal that JRD Krajné engaged in diverse socially responsible activities, focusing on social welfare, environmental stewardship, and economic responsibility. The paper contributes to the literature by offering a detailed exploration of JRD Krajné's historical CSR practices, showcasing how businesses in Slovakia demonstrated commitment to well-being before formal CSR practices were widely recognized. It highlights the importance of recognizing and preserving historical CSR practices as valuable precedents for shaping contemporary CSR strategies. This study provides insights for businesses aiming to foster sustainable practices and contribute to holistic societal development not just across agribusiness sector.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility; historical CSR practices; agribusiness

**JEL Classification:** M14; P31; Z13

## 1. Introduction

The classic economic theory of the 19th century, as noted by Vrabcová (2021), was rooted in the concept that entrepreneurial activity in a competitive market is driven by the goal of profit maximization. However, this approach sometimes led to contradictions, as short-term profit maximization does not always equate to the long-term sustainability of a business. Furthermore, Vrabcová (2021) highlights that with time, the corporate goal-setting process began to integrate social and environmental aspects. This integration gave rise to the idea of a global corporate objective: achieving sufficient profit while fostering the company's long-term development, and simultaneously respecting social and ecological standards. Elaborating on this, Kislingerová et al. (2023) emphasize that for several years, it has become evident, particularly in developed countries, that public demand—manifested through

political and consumer preferences—is steering companies to recognize environmental values. This shift, supported by long-term electoral support for environmentally conscious political formations, has led to the creation of extensive environmental and climate protection legislation. Kislingerová et al. (2023) also point out that in assessing corporate performance, traditional financial analysis indicators, such as profitability, liquidity, activity, debt, and capital market indicators, are still predominantly used. However, these traditional approaches seem insufficient for the transformed objectives of advanced economies toward circularity and overall sustainability.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, universally embraced by United Nations member states in 2015, constitutes a collective roadmap for advancing global peace and prosperity. It is a comprehensive vision aimed at ensuring the well-being of both humanity and the planet, spanning present and future generations. At its core lie the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), serving as an impassioned rallying call for action, binding together nations, both advanced and developing, under the umbrella of a global alliance. This framework underscores the imperative of eradicating poverty and various forms of deprivation while concurrently pursuing strategies to enhance healthcare and education, reduce disparities, foster economic growth, all while addressing the urgent challenges of climate change and preserving the ecological health of our oceans and forests (United Nations, 2015). The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals marked a pivotal moment in the international community's commitment to shaping the course of the world. Convened at a momentous United Nations General Assembly summit in September 2015, this assembly attracted participation from over 150 heads of state and government, charting a transformative path for global development (United Nations, 2015). These goals (Figure 1), designed to guide the trajectory of societies worldwide over the ensuing 15 years, were underpinned by a preamble articulating the fundamental dimensions that underlie the contemporary notion of sustainable development. This foundational construct is comprised of three essential pillars, subsequently augmented by two more: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership (Cheng et al., 2022).

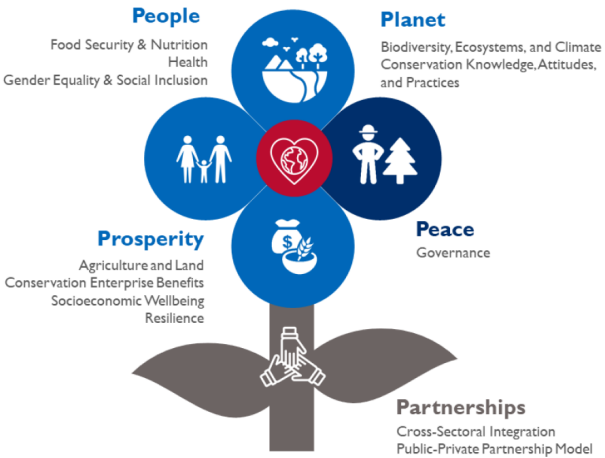


Figure 1. HEARTH MERL Framework: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships. (Cheng et al. (2022))

Corporate social responsibility, as defined by Kašparová (2011), signifies a paradigm wherein companies, in tandem with their primary profit-making mission, systematically monitor and mitigate the environmental and societal impacts of their operations. This approach seeks to diminish adverse effects and amplify beneficial outcomes. Yet, the full benefits of this concept often remain unrealized until a company's activities are transparently disclosed, after which the company may experience limited gains, chiefly in the form of cost savings or, optimally, strategic philanthropic endeavors (Kašparová, 2011). According this, Moldan (2020) highlights a persistent incongruity between the escalating trajectory of economic growth and the concomitant escalation in environmental burdens. Despite the pervasive pursuit of economic growth as the quintessential development objective worldwide, there has only been partial decoupling, whereby economic and environmental trends diverge but environmental burdens persist or even escalate, as corroborated by comprehensive data. Decoupling, though an aspiration for environmental sustainability, appears to be an elusive objective (Moldan, 2020).

In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained significant prominence as a vital aspect of business conduct, emphasizing an organization's commitment to economic, societal and environmental well-being. The relevance of CSR lies in its potential to drive sustainable development, foster positive stakeholder relationships, and enhance a company's reputation while contributing to "public good". However, until CSR has garnered widespread attention in the contemporary business landscape (primarily after multinationals enter the market), the historical CSR practices of enterprises, especially within the context of pre-1989 Slovakia, remain relatively underexplored.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a company's commitment to conducting business in an ethical, socially responsible, and sustainable manner (Carroll, 1999; Dahlsrud, 2008; Farooq et al., 2021). It involves the voluntary integration of economic, environmental, social, and ethical concerns into a company's core business operations, decision-making processes, and interactions with stakeholders (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). CSR reflects a company's recognition of its role in society and the acknowledgment of the broader impact of its actions beyond financial performance (European Commission, 2011). This paper aims to explore the historical perspective on CSR, with a focus on pre-1989 Slovakia cooperatives, and provide an overview of the current situation on the topic.

The historical perspective on CSR reveals that socially responsible activities have roots that predate the formalization of the CSR concept (Carroll, 1999; Visser, 2008; Velte, 2022). Scholars have traced the origins of CSR to the early 20th century, with the emergence of philanthropic activities by companies such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation (Kilby, 2021). These activities were driven by a sense of moral obligation and a desire to address social issues. In the context of pre-1989 Slovakia, CSR practices were influenced by the political and economic environment of the time. The socialist regime emphasized collective or "shared" responsibility and the welfare of the society as a whole. Companies were expected to contribute to the development of the country and support social programs (Ericksen, 2014; Nollkaemper et al., 2020). In the contemporary business landscape,

CSR has become an integral aspect of corporate strategies and is widely recognized as a means of fostering sustainable development and positive stakeholder relationships (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Fatima & Elbanna, 2023). Companies are increasingly adopting formalized CSR practices, including sustainability reporting, stakeholder engagement, and adherence to international standards like ISO certifications (European Commission, 2011). These practices help companies demonstrate their commitment to responsible business conduct and enhance their reputation among stakeholders (Tanentzap et al., 2015). Additionally, CSR initiatives are seen as a way to mitigate risks, attract and retain talent, and gain a competitive advantage in the market. CSR has evolved from a philanthropic activity to a strategic business practice that is integrated into companies' core operations (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Pfister, 2020; Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2021). The historical perspective on CSR reveals that socially responsible activities have roots that predate the formalization of the CSR concept (Visser, 2008). In the current business landscape, CSR is widely recognized as a means of fostering sustainable development and positive stakeholder relationships. Formalized CSR practices, including sustainability reporting, stakeholder engagement, and adherence to international standards, have become standard components of responsible business conduct (European Commission, 2011; Maccarrone & Contri, 2021; Hsueh et al., 2023). The case of pre-1989 Slovakia provides a valuable context to explore historical CSR practices and understand the evolution of CSR in different socio-political contexts.

Contemporary economies grapple with long-term challenges such as climate change, severe depletion of natural resources, and adverse impacts on the global ecosystem. Outdated business models founded on the premise of inexhaustible resources have become untenable. Consequently, substantial emphasis is being placed on sustainable development and the transition to a circular economy. Making decisions that are adaptive and responsive to the dynamic business environment becomes imperative. Describing corporate sustainable development necessitates emphasizing three interconnected core concepts: economic growth, social equity, and the inherent resilience of natural systems to maintain dynamic equilibrium (Kislingerová, 2023). In 2011, the European Commission introduced a novel definition, characterizing corporate social responsibility as a company's obligation to consider the societal impact of its activities. CSR advances the notion that companies bear responsibilities extending beyond economic and legal obligations, encompassing obligations to society as a whole. It embodies the conduct of managers and employees that not only respects the economic and technical interests of the company but also serves the interests of all stakeholders (Tetřevová et al., 2017). The critical question revolves around the target audience for a company's social responsibility. To facilitate managerial decision-making regarding the focus of social responsibility efforts, Freeman proposed the stakeholder theory in 1984. Stakeholders, broadly defined as any group or individual capable of influencing or being affected by the organization's objectives, play a pivotal role in this paradigm (Freeman, 1984).

Nowadays, CSR is widely recognized as a means of fostering sustainable development and positive stakeholder relationships. Formalized CSR practices, including sustainability reporting, stakeholder engagement, and adherence to international standards, have become standard components of responsible business conduct. The case of pre-1989 Slovakia

provides a valuable context to explore historical CSR practices and understand the evolution of CSR in different socio-political contexts. The research gap in the existing literature pertains to the lack of comprehensive insights into CSR activities undertaken by businesses, particularly agricultural cooperatives, in the era preceding the political changes of 1989 in Slovakia. Despite the absence of an official CSR label, many organizations engaged in activities aligned with contemporary CSR principles. This gap inhibits a thorough understanding of how businesses pursued social, environmental, and economic responsibility before CSR became a widely recognized concept.

This paper seeks to fill the gap by providing a detailed exploration of the historical CSR practices of the agricultural cooperative JRD Krajné performed before 1989 in Slovakia. The study delves into the cooperative's diverse activities that may be considered socially responsible in today's context. By examining these pre-1989 CSR endeavors, this article aims to shed light on the organic development of socially responsible initiatives within the region's business culture. Through an analysis of the cooperative's social, environmental, and economic activities, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how businesses in Slovakia demonstrated a commitment to the well-being of their employees, local communities, and the environment before formal CSR practices were widely adopted. Additionally, this article highlights the importance of recognizing and preserving historical CSR practices as valuable precedents in shaping contemporary CSR strategies.

By bridging the research gap through a detailed investigation of JRD Krajné's pre-1989 CSR activities, this paper aims to offer valuable insights for businesses across various sectors, enabling them to learn from historical experiences and incorporate responsible practices into their current operations. Moreover, this research emphasizes the significance of implementing CSR not merely as a contemporary trend but as a time-honored approach to fostering sustainable business practices and contributing to the holistic development of society.

## 2. Methodology

The aim of this scientific study was to investigate the historical context of socially responsible activities implemented in Slovakia cooperatives before 1989. Specifically, we sought to explore the practices and initiatives conducted in the agro-sector business during the centrally planned economy era.

The methodology employed in this study involved the use of structured interviews as the primary data collection method. A predefined set of 11 open-ended questions was formulated to capture comprehensive insights into the subject matter. To ensure accuracy and clarity, the questions were translated for the interviewee, Ing. Vojtech Tíčík, a recognized expert with extensive experience in the agro-sector business. Mr. Tíčík served as the former chairman of the acclaimed Unified Agricultural Cooperative in Krajné during the centrally planned economy era in Slovakia before 1989. He also transitioned successfully into private entrepreneurship after 1989, leading several business sectors, with a focus on agro-sector activities. Therefore, we believe that he is a suitable subject for such research. The interview consisted of 11 open-ended questions:

- What CSR activities were conducted before 1989?
- Who managed and planned these activities?
- Were they centrally planned or monitored?
- How much funding was allocated to them?
- Were any awards granted that could be considered socially responsible today?
- Was there any certification of these activities?
- Were there any reports or documentation on these activities?
- Were responsible companies favored by customers, the state, and employees?
- Did multinational companies bring CSR to Slovakia after 1989?
- Do you believe CSR should be mandatory?
- Based on past experiences, what do you consider crucial for the current implementation of CSR activities in companies, not only in the agro-sector?

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations that may have influenced the outcomes of the study. Firstly, the sample size was limited to a single interviewee, which might not fully represent the diverse range of experiences and perspectives on the topic. Secondly, the study focused exclusively on socially responsible activities within the agro-sector, thus possibly omitting important insights from other sectors.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the restricted sample size, generalizability of the findings to the entire Slovakian pre-1989 context may be limited. It is necessary to exercise caution when applying these results to a broader population.

As the interviewee, Ing. Vojtech Tíčík, has substantial expertise in agro-sector business, potential bias may exist in the responses provided. Efforts were made to minimize bias through impartially formulated questions and an objective approach to data analysis.

### 3. Results

Before 1989, the agricultural cooperative JRD Krajné, under the leadership of Ing. Vojtech Tíčík, engaged in various activities that can now be considered as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices. These activities, although not officially labeled as CSR at that time, aimed to assist the cooperative's employees, the local community, and nature.

**Social Activities:** The cooperative focused on social activities that supported employees and their families. Notably, they provided a company-owned kindergarten, which facilitated working parents with young children, who were preferred in the society at the time. Additionally, JRD Krajné made above-average investments in workforce regeneration and offered a sauna and massage services to all employees. Moreover, the cooperative participated in international "družba", providing recreational opportunities abroad for its employees, even sending an entire plane of employees on vacation to Cuba. Obviously, the destinations were picked in regard of international partnerships of the entity and contemporary preferences, but regeneration of workforce regeneration and international cooperation were highly appreciated.

**Environmental Activities:** The cooperative's core focus was on ensuring the well-being of agricultural communities, making environmental activities a priority. They engaged in

activities such as soil protection, water management, land improvements, and habitat enhancements. Processes in agricultural primary production (both in plant and animal production) were aimed at achieving high yields, however, much attention was paid to activities nowadays labeled as "sustainability", for example: soil protection, biodiversity and water management. The extreme intensification of agriculture even in our territory took place mainly after 1989, while there is an effort to apply several of the agro-environmental principles from the period of peasant cooperatives to the present.

**Economic Activities:** JRD Krajné pursued economically oriented activities with the goal of achieving outstanding results compared to other entities within the region, country, and even whole Czechoslovakia. These activities were deeply rooted in a "social contract" ensuring that better overall performance by the cooperative would result in improved benefits for its members. The benefits were not limited to financial rewards but included additional distribution of surplus production or profits to employees in the form of naturals or supporting local infrastructure development, construction of public buildings, cemetery renovations, sidewalks, street lighting, and other public beneficial activities.

**Planning and Management of CSR Activities:** All activities, including those now considered socially responsible, were generally planned and conditioned by cooperation with supervisory bodies such as the Agricultural Production Administration, and the Slovak Union of Cooperative Farmers, etc. However, specific activities were directly overseen by the cooperative's presidency. Officially, CSR activities were not centrally planned but were rather considered as part of other plans, if appeared separately, they were usually categorized as "representational" expenses. Therefore, no specific budget was allocated for CSR activities, but financial resources were available within the generous general budget for "representational activities". According to the former chairman, there were practically no limitations on funding, as good ideas were readily supported by the authorities who evaluated them on an individual basis. The financial resources for CSR activities not directly connected with the core activities of the entity many times came from the budget for "dožinky" or sponsorships from local communities, such as for football clubs or fire brigades.

**Awards and Recognition:** Awards were given to individual entities based on their economic performance and other indicators of engagement, including aspects that can be considered as CSR. Outstanding employees were also frequently rewarded with financial and non-financial incentives, and diplomas were presented to them with the participation of the whole community.

**Certification and Reporting:** Although there was no formal certification for these activities, the cooperative adhered to ISO systems and strict regulations regarding production and food processing, given its agricultural nature. Employees received various training on quality, and processes were closely monitored for correctness.

**Perception and Support:** The socially responsible businesses were greatly favored in the eyes of customers, the state, and employees. Entities that achieved not only good economic results but also demonstrated a commitment to societal well-being were positively perceived by various stakeholders. The employees were proud to work for such a company, and the local community strongly supported and collaborated with them. From the perspective of the state

and governing authorities, these companies were highly encouraged and seen as exemplary, enjoying special status and privileges among other businesses, both locally and internationally.

CSR Before and After 1989: Contrary to the notion that multinational companies introduced CSR to Slovakia after 1989, CSR activities were already prevalent before this period, albeit unofficially. In the agricultural sector, there existed a tradition of comprehensive approaches to benefiting all members of local communities, not just cooperative members. While these activities were not specifically named CSR and were not budgeted separately, the centrally planned system ensured monitoring and support for various aspects, including support for employees, communities, and nature.

Opinion on Mandatory CSR: The interviewee expressed a belief in the necessity of mandatory CSR. He stated that, the state should strongly support businesses in implementing CSR activities and establish a systematic approach for their realization.

Key Factors for Current CSR Implementation: According to interviewee, in contemporary CSR implementation for businesses, including those beyond the agricultural sector, collaboration among individuals, institutions, and local authorities in the region is crucial. Organizing events and platforms to facilitate knowledge sharing, cooperation, and coordination among stakeholders will lead to effective and efficient CSR practices. Additionally, focusing on concentrated production and supporting specialized areas with competitive advantages in the region can contribute to sustainable development. Establishing geographic clusters that unite local businesses, working communities, and nonprofit organizations can efficiently support CSR activities. The involvement of the state and local government authorities is vital in creating an environment conducive to the development of such regions, potentially providing assistance programs.

#### 4. Discussion

The interview provides a valuable insight into the historical practice of corporate social responsibility of the JRD Krajné agricultural cooperative before the political changes in Slovakia in 1989. Although the cooperative was not officially designated as CSR, it engaged in activities that correspond to the current principles of CSR according to the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997). These activities focused on social, environmental and economic aspects and demonstrated a commitment to employee care, community development and sustainable practices as they are currently perceived in a number of studies (Le et al., 2023; Vrabcová & Urbancová, 2023; Rostami & Salehi, 2024). The social activities of JRD Krajné were focused on the well-being of employees and their families. By providing a company nursery and offering facilities such as a sauna and massage services, the co-op has shown a genuine concern for work-life balance and the health of its employees.

The absence of central planning in the field of CSR suggests that these activities were driven primarily by local needs and values, rather than a standardized top-down approach. This grassroots involvement likely contributed to the success and relevance of the initiatives in their site-specific context. Study Tešovičová and Krchová (2022) demonstrates that today's companies continue to be more involved in regional environmental issues compared to global ones. Although the financial allocation for CSR activities was not allocated within the



dedicated budget, it came from resources allocated to "representational activities" or through sponsorship contributions from local communities. This points to the cooperative's ability to creatively raise funds for its socially responsible activities, often based on the merits of ideas and community support, Strečanský (2023) also came to similar conclusions in his study.

Contrary to popular belief, the respondent refutes the opinion that multinational companies introduced CSR practices in Slovakia after 1989. The situation before 1989 indicates that there were already efforts in society to carry out socially beneficial activities that corresponded with the spirit of that time (Benda, 2023).

The discussion concludes with the key factors that are decisive for the current implementation of CSR for businesses, even outside the agricultural sector. The emphasis on cooperation between individuals, institutions and local authorities in the region promotes knowledge sharing, collaboration and effective coordination of CSR practices. The creation of geographic clusters that connect businesses, communities and non-profit organizations creates a supportive ecosystem for CSR activities. The conclusions of our study correspond and appropriately extend the conclusions of the study carried out by Vrabcová and Urbanová (2023), when in their study carried out on a sample of 183 companies from the field of agriculture (n1 = 183) they identified factors influencing innovative areas in relation to sustainability. The results of the factor analysis showed a six-factor solution: process approach, social responsibility, quality management system, supply chain operational processes, production demand, and employee performance.

Overall, the interview sheds light on the historical CSR practices of the Slovak agricultural cooperative and provides valuable insights for the current and future implementation of CSR in various business sectors. The contribution of our study reflects the conclusions of Rostami & Salehi (2024), who emphasize that the agricultural sector and farmers' sustainability activities are considered critical factors for realizing a more sustainable future. In the light of past experiences, CSR is highlighted in our study as a necessary aspect of sustainable development and the need for active state support in creating a systematic framework for the implementation of CSR activities.

According to Le et al. (2023) corporate social responsibility has an impact and can induce managers to change their environmental strategies. Our study builds on these findings, and considering the fact that CSR continues to evolve, the historical perspectives presented in our study can guide business management and policy makers in promoting responsible practices and achieving sustainable development goals.

## 5. Conclusions

The literature review revealed that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a multifaceted concept encompassing ethical, socially responsible, and sustainable business practices. Although the formal CSR concept emerged later, historical evidence indicates that businesses, including agricultural cooperatives like JRD Krajné in pre-1989 Slovakia, engaged in activities aligned with contemporary CSR principles. These activities, centered around social welfare, environmental stewardship, and economic responsibility, reflected a commitment to employees, communities, and nature. While not officially labeled as CSR,

these practices provide valuable insights into the organic development of responsible business conduct in the region.

The current application of CSR principles in the management of agricultural enterprises operating within market mechanism conditions in many ways builds upon and continues the principles of social responsibility from the period before 1989. In the past, the economic performance and operational activity of PD Krajné were conditioned by bodies such as the Agricultural Production Administration, the Slovak Union of Cooperative Farmers, and others which to some extent set the rules and general expectations for the functioning of business entities as part of the community and society. Despite the changed business conditions after 1989 (market and price mechanisms), today the family company TBS, a.s. continues to invest in building a more comfortable countryside for the citizens of the region (supporting biodiversity, family-oriented management, waste minimization, preparation for droughts and floods, etc.).

This scientific study aimed to explore the historical CSR practices of JRD Krajné before 1989 in Slovakia. Structured interviews with Ing. Vojtech Tíčík, the former chairman of the cooperative, provided comprehensive insights into socially responsible activities before 1989. Despite certain limitations, including restricted sample size and exclusive focus on the agro-sector, the study offers meaningful contributions to understanding pre-1989 CSR initiatives. Results of the interview highlighted various socially responsible activities undertaken by JRD Krajné. Socially, the cooperative supported its employees through facilities like a kindergarten, sauna, and massage services. Environmental initiatives focused on preserving agricultural communities through soil protection, water management, and habitat enhancements. Economically, the cooperative pursued excellence and shared benefits with members under the framework of a "social contract." The absence of central planning for CSR and creative funding strategies further illustrated the region's self-reliance in addressing societal needs.

The study of JRD Krajné's historical CSR practices before the political changes of 1989 in Slovakia offers several implications for contemporary business practices, particularly in how companies can integrate social responsibility into their operations for sustainable development:

- Wider integration of social activities into business operations - modern businesses can learn from their socially responsible activities by implementing employee support programs that go beyond the basic requirements to foster a positive workplace culture and enhance employee satisfaction and loyalty.
- Environmental stewardship as a core business strategy - the cooperative's environmental activities highlight the critical role of businesses in preserving natural resources. Today's companies can adopt similar environmental stewardship principles, integrating sustainable practices into their core operations to minimize their ecological footprint and contribute to the planet's health.
- Economic responsibility through community engagement - the concept of a "social contract" utilized by JRD Krajné, where better performance led to improved benefits for its members and the community, exemplifies the potential of businesses to drive societal progress.

Modern enterprises can engage in community development projects, support local infrastructure, and contribute to public well-being as part of their economic responsibility.

- Decentralized management of CSR activities - the decentralized management of CSR activities allowed JRD Krajné to address local needs effectively. This approach can be beneficial for contemporary businesses by enabling them to tailor their CSR initiatives to meet the specific needs of their communities, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of their social responsibility efforts.

This research serves as a foundation for further investigations into historical CSR practices of various businesses and sectors in Slovakia. Expanding the sample size and including diverse perspectives will enhance the generalizability of findings. Additionally, exploring the impact of historical CSR activities on long-term sustainability and community development can provide deeper insights into the enduring benefits of responsible business practices. Future studies may also delve into the institutional and policy-level factors that facilitated socially responsible initiatives during the centrally planned economy era.

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