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Multisided collaboration and double stakeholder approach coexistence in restaurants: From Corporate Social Responsibility practices to partnerships for the goals

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Abstract

Restaurants have been becoming increasingly aware of their responsibilities and impact; however, literature on corporate social responsibility has mainly applied quantitative methods to analyze the environmental dimension of sustainability. By drawing on the stakeholder theory approach (normative vs. instrumental) and through a qualitative narrative method based on the analysis of 41 open interviews, this study aims to evaluate which stakeholders are engaged in restaurant-related CSR practices and the nature of the relationship that ties them together. The results show that although a normative approach is more common, both approaches coexist in many cases. The emergence of multisided collaboration and a double approach enables achieving sustainability issues outside a strictly instrumental logic. This study contributes to the scant literature on CSR in restaurants by analyzing a wider set of stakeholders engaged in sustainability practices and indicating which practices are common and why and how stakeholders are involved.

KEYWORDS
corporate social responsibility, qualitative research, restaurants, stakeholder theory, sustainability practices

1 | INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry has undergone major transformations in recent years. Updated food regulations, new health, safety, and traceability standards, changing consumer choices, and increasing consumer awareness of healthy eating have forced restaurants to change their business models and integrate sustainable development (Ng & Sia, 2023; OECD, 2021). Various sustainability issues, including food waste and resource consumption, concern the restaurant industry (Ng & Sia, 2023; Tenenbaum, 2019).

According to Cane and Parra (2020), many governments have implemented policies and recommendations to incentivize practices that reduce food waste and its negative environmental effects, ensuring better environmental sustainability. They highlight the pivotal role that consumer awareness plays in the implementation of these practices. Similarly, de Visser-Amundson (2022) explains that the involvement of some stakeholders and the diffusion of social practices is necessary to increase awareness, while Alonso et al. (2018) highlight how employees are crucial for transferring sustainable knowledge and green practices to customers, helping to spread good practices and increase customer retention over time.

The transition toward corporate social responsibility (CSR)-oriented business models requires the involvement of all relevant stakeholders (Shim et al., 2021). Some authors have analyzed restaurant stakeholders and highlighted how firms' strategies change according to stakeholders' behavior (Perrigot et al., 2021; Vrontis

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et al., 2022). However, few studies have analyzed stakeholders' consideration through the lens of CSR practices, and most considered three main groups of stakeholders—customers, suppliers, and employees (Kaur et al., 2022).

Furthermore, studies on the corporate motivations for stakeholders' consideration have shown how different approaches can be used, distinguishing between normative and instrumental approaches. Among the latest, some scholars have analyzed the stakeholders' influence on the motivations for nonfinancial reporting (Qian et al., 2020) or on firm purpose definition (Riso et al., 2023).

Understanding how to integrate sustainability practices into the restaurant business model is extremely important to ensure the long-term survival of companies in this sector: sustainability, in fact, has a positive impact on the performance and competitiveness of restaurants (Cantele & Cassia, 2020). The involvement of stakeholders to achieve sustainability objectives can, therefore, be an opportunity to start a virtuous path within restaurants that allows them to survive over time (Koh et al., 2023). For this reason, analyzing the approaches with which restaurants engage stakeholders can be crucial to achieving a good integration of sustainability into the restaurant's business model. An investigation of stakeholder approaches in the restaurant industry is lacking in the literature (Kaur et al., 2022). This study attempted to fill this gap by conducting qualitative research on 41 restaurants in Italy. Information about existing CSR and green practices was gathered through open interviews, and analysis of implemented practices highlighted which stakeholders restaurants considered. Moreover, the restaurant–stakeholder relationship was studied to check if restaurants' approach to stakeholders was mainly instrumental or normative (Qian et al., 2020). This analysis sheds new light on restaurants' sustainability strategies and implementation of CSR practices. In detail, a more in-depth understanding of sustainability practices (environmental and social) implemented by restaurants and the relationship they build with stakeholders drives the identification of potential collaborations that, when effectively implemented, enable advantageous results, not only for both firm and stakeholders (win–win relation stemming from an instrumental approach) but for the accomplishment of "higher-level" and wicked sustainability problems. The findings suggest how collaboration with diverse stakeholders can make restaurant sustainability practices more effective, particularly when involving multiple categories of stakeholders (e.g., employees and customers). Further, the study highlights how the normative approach is necessary to ensure the achievement of social and environmental aims that are not addressed by a strictly instrumental approach. A normative approach is triggered by an alignment of values and interests among the firm and various stakeholders, leading to collaborations useful for achieving common objectives. As a consequence, the importance of communication and disclosure of sustainability issues emerges to create this necessary common view of shared values.

The study contributes to the literature in several ways: first of all, it offers a deeper understanding of which stakeholder categories are considered relevant for restaurants, highlighting a particular consideration for the "community" stakeholder group (with its various subjects such as nonprofit entities, hotel schools, trade associations, etc.), which was not emerging in previous literature. Furthermore, it shows which sustainability practices are more common among restaurants and which are neglected (e.g., gender equality and sustainability reporting), marking the way for expanding and improving the implementation of sustainability practices. The qualitative and narrative approach offers a detailed description of the practices and stakeholders, which has not previously been addressed in the prevailing quantitative studies. Third, the study sheds light on the stakeholder approaches adopted by restaurants and relates them to the kind of practices implemented. This evidence leads to a further, partially unexpected result: some common practices involving different stakeholder categories represent an example of multisided collaboration enabled by the coexistence of different approaches, and this coexistence is beneficial to sustainability initiatives' scope and effectiveness.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review with a focus on the stakeholder theory, the empirical literature on sustainability and stakeholders in the restaurant sectors, and the research questions proposed; Section 3 presents the methodology, while Sections 4 and 5 present results and discussion, respectively. Finally, the conclusions are shown in Section 6.

2 | LITERATURE BACKGROUND

2.1 | CSR and sustainability in the restaurant industry

In the last few years, food service businesses, particularly restaurants, have been pressured by different crisis events (Bivona & Cruz, 2021). Many restaurants have reviewed their strategy and tried to respond resiliently to continue their activities (Bhattacharya et al., 2021). Despite these crises, some authors explain that restaurants continue to direct their strategy toward CSR and sustainability (Iazzi et al., 2022).

Literature on CSR in the restaurant industry is rooted in the recent period, with a focus on the environmental dimension of sustainability (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017). Many scholars have studied how consumer behaviors regarding the sustainability practices of restaurants have changed (Namkung & Jang, 2013; Rhou et al., 2016). Other studies have highlighted which issues mainly address the interest of consumers, such as food origin, supply chain safety, care for food quality, and the fight against food waste (Cantele & Cassia, 2020; Cochran et al., 2018; de Visser-Amundson, 2022). Furthermore, several studies have suggested that sustainability practices in the restaurant industry include respect for working conditions (Seyitoğlu et al., 2023), fair remuneration, and the adoption of sustainable practices in the production process (Davies & Konisky, 2000).

The recent proposal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework for 2030 by the United Nations emphasizes CSR and sustainability in the restaurant sector (Higgins-Desbiolles & Wijesinghe, 2019). According to de Visser-Amundson (2022),

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restaurants could contribute to the achievement of SDGs, especially Goals 12 (responsible consumption and production) and 17 (partnerships for the goals). From a forward-looking perspective, Tan et al. (2019) analyzed the perception of restaurant operators in Malaysia toward the green practices that could be adopted: they affirmed how, in the absence of specific guidelines or standards, it is difficult for restaurants to know what green practices to adopt.

While the literature has extensively addressed environmental issues and related practices, few studies have addressed social issues (Clarke & Chen, 2007), and most addressed customers from different perspectives (Wang et al., 2013). Rhou et al. (2016) explained how customers' awareness of CSR is an important goal for restaurants to pursue while studying the sustainable practices that consumers appreciate and how consumers' attitudes toward various attributes influence their behaviors. Similarly, Mejia et al. (2022) explained how restaurants' performance changes according to the social sustainability practices implemented. The authors asserted that social practices in hospitality are important because of the public's perception that hard and underpaid work characterizes the sector. They suggested that social sustainability is the convergence of two dimensions of CSR—CSR-employee and CSR-community—that manifest in company behavior toward these stakeholders (Mejia et al., 2022). Further sustainability topics emerged in Shim et al. (2021), which discussed the importance of paying attention to charity, education, housing, affordable pricing, and product quality.

2.2 | CSR practices and the stakeholder theory: A conceptual framework

The stakeholder theory is a framework widely used to investigate different aspects of firm management (Freeman et al., 2020). Since Freeman's (1984) definition of stakeholders, the literature has increasingly highlighted the strategic importance of stakeholder consideration by firms (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). Focusing on the theoretical aspect of the stakeholder theory, Donaldson and Preston (1995) proposed three principal approaches to interpreting the firm-stakeholder relationship.

The descriptive approach states that stakeholder theory is a useful model for generally describing the relationship between a firm and its stakeholders, while the instrumental approach argues that the theory is useful for explaining the connection "between the practice of stakeholder management and the achievement of various corporate performance goals." Finally, the normative approach argues that a firm embeds stakeholder interests into its way of doing business as it searches for stakeholders' legitimacy and tries to satisfy their interest as relevant in themselves and "not merely because of its ability to further the interests of some other group, such as the shareowners" (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Based on the normative approach, firms root their business in ethics and moral behaviors (Wijnberg, 2000). Gibson (2000) explains that the normative approach is useful in understanding "why corporations ought to consider stakeholder interests even in the absence of any apparent benefit." According to Donaldson and Preston (1995), the different approaches are nested within each other, with the normative approach embracing the instrumental and the instrumental including the descriptive. In contrast, some authors discussed the coexistence of different approaches (Steurer, 2006; Valentinov & Hajdu, 2021). Valentinov and Hajdu (2021) explained how the coexistence and integration of the normative and instrumental approaches permit the investigation of the institutional texture of modern society. Firms are getting increasingly oriented toward pursuing the satisfaction of stakeholders' interests as a corporate objective. Highlighting stakeholders' influence on firms, many authors have described the interdependence between stakeholders and CSR practices (Costa et al., 2022; Galan & Zuñiga-Vicente, 2023), with Freudenreich et al. (2020) describing how stakeholders' consideration was embedded in the business model and corporate strategy of firms that implement CSR practices. Some authors explained how firms could create the foundation for long-term success by implementing CSR practices and considering stakeholders' interests (Koh et al., 2023). By including CSR and sustainability issues in their business model, firms embrace innovation and create value for all stakeholders involved (Yuan et al., 2020). Finally, some authors explained how sustainability reporting could improve stakeholders' management and engagement, as accounting and reporting are useful for establishing multilateral communication with stakeholders (Herremans et al., 2016).

2.3 | Stakeholders' collaboration beyond "the" business case

Many authors have extensively debated the "business case" and the consideration of stakeholder interests as a means of gaining an advantage in the market by analyzing the motivations behind companies' adoption of sustainability practices (Carroll, 1991; Schaltegger et al., 2012; Wheeler & Sillanpa, 1998).

Over time, the concept of the business case for sustainability was introduced, demonstrating how taking an interest in sustainability issues could bring success to the company (Schaltegger et al., 2019). However, this concept has also been criticized; some studies have highlighted how companies inspired by a strict business case aim tend to focus on sustainability practices that create eco-efficiency (e.g., the reduction of energy consumption) rather than on radically changing the business model in the name of sustainability (Busch et al., 2024; Hahn et al., 2014). The business case hardly drives firms toward those social and environmental issues that are outside the firm's competitive context and value chain, preventing the achievement of generic social issues that are important for society and the community in general (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Recently, Busch et al. (2024) reevaluated the idea of a business case by stating that there is not just one business case ("the" business case), but there are different business cases depending on the sector and country in which the company operates. The authors propose to overcome traditional ways of thinking about the business case by focusing on the interests of all stakeholders involved and

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propose to embrace an "all stakeholder win" approach to create collaborative business cases for sustainability: "Considering different stakeholder views makes it possible to distinguish between a case for stakeholders to engage with firms on sustainability initiatives and a case for firms to engage with stakeholders for sustainability. Whether viewed from a stakeholder or firm perspective, both are cases of business for sustainability" (Busch et al., 2024, p. 783). However, major global challenges (such as the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) cannot be addressed by businesses alone. Therefore, collaboration with stakeholders is fundamental (Pedersen et al., 2021). As many scholars have addressed, stakeholder engagement is one of the main corporate activities useful for understanding the interests of stakeholders and considering them when defining strategies (López-Concepción et al., 2022; Rathobei et al., 2024). Some authors have focused on the collaboration between companies and stakeholders in achieving sustainability objectives in different industries (Airike et al., 2016; Hossain et al., 2023; Phiri et al., 2019), but rarely in the restaurant sector (Kaur et al., 2022). Phiri et al. (2019) analyzed how stakeholder pressures contributed to directing CSR practices in the mining sector in Zambia: in particular, the study highlighted how the local community is the most influential stakeholder group and how collaboration with NGOs has changed the CSR approach of mining companies. Fontana (2018) has extensively discussed the role of NGOs as key stakeholders in enabling corporate CSR practices in Sweden. Moreover, Airike et al. (2016) propose a study on mineral resources used in the electronics sector. Through multiple case studies, the authors show the different approaches to involving stakeholders in the definition of CSR practices, highlighting how companies have different expectations from stakeholders and how external and internal factors (e.g., legislation, culture, the organization itself) can influence the collaboration with stakeholders. Furthermore, Hossain et al. (2023) analyzed the effect of collaborative stakeholder relationships on the definition of CSR practices in apparel suppliers in Bangladesh. The results showed how the effect of collaborative relationships on practices is much stronger when stakeholders' interests are aligned (in particular, the authors analyzed the alignment of interests between media, buyers, and government). Finally, Elia et al. (2020) show how collaboration between companies and stakeholders can create open innovation. They suggest implications for policymakers who should incentivize public–private partnerships, exploiting the "nonpecuniary" motivations of the participating actors and governance mechanisms based on citizen engagement.

2.4 | Stakeholder consideration in restaurants' business model

Stakeholders play an important role in restaurants' business models (Shim et al., 2021). Stakeholder consideration allows restaurants to achieve corporate aims and obtain a competitive advantage (Lepistö et al., 2022).

Vrontis et al. (2022) conducted a case study involving 36 key stakeholders in the Langhe region. Through the lens of stakeholder theory, they identified internal and external stakeholders involved by restaurants in the achievement of sustainable development in the region: local entrepreneurs, family, employees, local growers, local providers, and the community. Furthermore, Perrigot et al. (2021) analyzed how salient stakeholders conditioned waste management practices in franchise chains. Based on Freeman's (1984) framework, they classified relevant stakeholders into external (national government, local government, customers, and suppliers) and internal (employees and franchisees) and found that while franchisees and their employees could educate customers to follow green practices in waste management, franchisors remain skeptical about the importance of fast-food environmental performance as they believe it does not influence consumer choices. Another study on social practices implementation by Alonso et al. (2018) discussed the role of the employees in educating customers about CSR practices, which improves customer retention in the long term and during a crisis. Byrd (2007) analyzed how stakeholders' inclusion and involvement are incorporated into the basic concept of sustainable tourism development. The importance of stakeholder theory in the hospitality sector was debated by Jones et al. (2016), who explained that the theory is a promising route to investigate CSR issues and sustainability policies and practices. Qian et al. (2020) underlined the importance of understanding which approach (normative or instrumental) prevails to avoid implementing CSR actions just for economic purposes and to suggest to policymakers how to implement the best strategies supporting sustainability development. With reference to hotels, Farmaki (2019) investigated stakeholders' interests and analyzed their influence on CSR implementation using a qualitative approach and the stakeholder salience framework (Mitchell et al., 1997). A recent systematic literature review on the role of CSR in the restaurant sector (Kaur et al., 2022) found that researchers mainly focus on issues like CSR issues at the organizational level, CSR practices and performance, environmental issues, managers, customers, societal-level CSR, and external issues. The authors stated the need for the literature to focus more on restaurants' stakeholders as the current literature is concentrated only on three traditional stakeholder categories: employees, suppliers, and customers. Moreover, most studies use a quantitative approach, but a qualitative approach is preferable for an in-depth analysis of firm-stakeholder relationships (Kaur et al., 2022).

2.5 | Research purpose and research questions

As outlined in the sections above, the analysis of the literature on CSR in restaurants has highlighted how the approach of the previous studies has been mainly quantitative with a focus on environmental issues, providing little attention to social practices and stakeholders (Kaur et al., 2022). Analyzing stakeholders can be very useful in understanding how companies create value according to win–win strategies through collaboration with them (Busch et al., 2024). In the context of the restaurant industry, this collaboration can be particularly beneficial for effectively implementing sustainability practices in response to typical industry issues, such as for example food waste, environmental

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pollution, and resource consumption (Ng & Sia, 2023; Tenenbaum, 2019), but also to increase stakeholder satisfaction.

Drawing on stakeholder theory to analyze the relationships between companies and stakeholders and to investigate how companies create value through their engagement (Koh et al., 2023), our study aims to fill the gap in the literature by analyzing stakeholders' considerations through the lens of CSR practices implemented in restaurants. In particular, the analysis, focused on what motivated restaurants to move toward CSR practices and engage their stakeholders, is interpreted in the light of instrumental and normative approaches through the operationalization of corporate behavior as "normative" or "instrumental," according to Qian et al. (2020). Furthermore, an analysis of the interrelations between practices and stakeholders and restaurants' different approaches is adopted to show the presence of multisided relationships and the pursuit of win–win results (Busch et al., 2024), stimulating collaboration as occurred in other sectors (Airike et al., 2016; Hossain et al., 2023; Phiri et al., 2019).

The research questions that guided our analysis are:

RQ1. Which CSR initiatives are spread in restaurants, and which stakeholders are involved in these practices?

RQ2. Which stakeholder approaches are used by CSR-committed restaurants, and how do they relate to the different stakeholder categories?

To answer the research questions, we conducted a qualitative study on 41 restaurants in Italy.

3 | METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was used in this study. Specifically, open interviews (Qu & Dumay, 2011) about CSR in restaurants were conducted to determine which practices were implemented, which stakeholders were relevant, and why they were engaged. The interview guide was based on the evidence emerging from the literature framework: in particular, as regards the sustainability practices implemented by restaurants, the interview aimed to investigate the types of practices (social or environmental) and motivations that pushed restaurants to implement them (Kaur et al., 2022). Regarding the stakeholders, the interview identified the stakeholders involved in the practices (both as beneficiaries of and collaborators in sustainability), investigating the motivations to involve them (Qian et al., 2020). So, the interview protocol included open questions on restaurant features (size, category), CSR objectives and practices implemented, motivations to consider CSR in its strategy, and a description of the relationships with its stakeholders. Specifically, the literature has been used to investigate certain types of practices. For example, Mejia et al. (2022) offer ideas for investigating social practices toward workers, particularly regarding remuneration, working conditions, and training. These questions were included in the interviews. The approach of Qian et al. (2020) was used with particular regard to motivations related to practices to formulate useful questions to intercept the approach linked to the practice implemented: whether instrumental (the restaurant expects a return from that practice) or normative (where the ethical purpose prevails over the utilitarian one). Appendix A provides some examples of questions proposed in the open interviews. Restaurants were selected among those demonstrating a relevant CSR commitment (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010) based on a previous extended survey in which different kinds of sustainability practices were assessed (Cantele & Cassia, 2020), and the final sample was determined using the criteria of theoretical saturation described by Dai et al. (2019), which explains how "data collection should continue until no significant insights are generated and there are no mere emergent patterns to be discerned." During the interview period, periodic meetings were held between the researchers to discuss the contents of the interviews, the preliminary results, and any new findings that emerged. After interview no. 41, the group of researchers believed they had reached the saturation point, with no new information emerging compared with the previous interviews, and had achieved good consistency in the results. The sample finally comprised 41 Italian restaurants, as presented in Table 1.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted, recorded, and later transcribed. Subsequently, through content analysis (Guthrie, 2014), the interviews were independently analyzed by the researchers to identify the stakeholders involved and the approach used by the restaurants. This way, the subjectivity of the evaluation was reduced (Gioia et al., 2013). To classify each sentence under the instrumental or normative approach, the definition by Donaldson and Preston (1995) was used as reported in the example (Table 2): when a sentence referred to an explicit or implicit competitive or financial advantage, it was codified as "instrumental," while when it inferred an ethical motivation, it was codified as "normative."

4 | RESULTS

The analysis showed the environmental and social practices performed by the restaurants, and through the analysis of their practices, the stakeholders involved were identified. The main practices performed by interviewed restaurants were:

1. *Fight against food waste*: This issue concerns many restaurants that have adopted practices like reducing portions and/or proposing that the "doggy bag" be taken away.
2. *Use of renewable energies and reduction of resource consumption*: The consumption of energy and water was a recurring theme. We found the use of renewable energies (e.g., solar panels and the choice of certain types of suppliers) and employee awareness of the correct use of resources to be among the good practices implemented by the restaurants interviewed.

Choice of seasonal food and local suppliers: Restaurants consider seasonal food and involving local suppliers synonyms for quality and

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TABLE 1 Sample of restaurants included and interviewed.

Restaurant code	Interviewed	Employees	Seating capacity	Interview time
1	Owner	4	60	1 h 10 m
2	Owner	2	25	1 h 13 m
3	Owner	11	350	1 h 6 m
4	Owner	5	64	57 m
5	Owner	10	50	56 m
6	Owner	8	220	1 h 30 m
7	Manager	3	60	1 h 24 m
8	Owner	n.a.	90	59 m
9	Owner	6	n.a.	39 m
10	Owner	5	50	1 h 25 m
11	Owner	12	300	1 h 37 m
12	Owner	8	110	1 h 30 m
13	Manager	15	300	50 m
14	Owner	15	250	50 m
15	Owner	7	70	50 m
16	Manager	5	40	58 m
17	Owner	23	120	1 h 30 m
18	Owner	6	32	1 h 30 m
19	Owner	21	110	1 h 30 m
20	Owner	3	45	2 h 10 m
21	Owner	15	100	50 m
22	Owner	3	40	51 m
23	Manager	13	60	57 m
24	Owner	n.a.	n.a.	1 h 18 m
25	Owner	2	50	1 h 20 m
26	Owner	3	50	1 h 5 m
27	Owner	5	50	37 m
28	Owner	6	80	48 m
29	Owner	4	80	1 h 12 m
30	Owner	5	120	40 m
31	Manager	18	160	1 h 21 m
32	Owner	7	110	59 m
33	Manager	5	50	48 m
34	Manager	5	120	1 h 20 m
35	Manager	20	60	1 h 18 m
36	Owner	4	50	58 m
37	Owner	4	70	40 m
38	Owner	20	100	1 h 6 m
39	Owner	5	70	50 m
40	Owner	4	35	35 m
41	Owner	10	120	55 m

strength in attracting and retaining customers. Thus, they pay attention to the supply chain and prefer local suppliers and seasonal food to ensure high-quality products and generate wealth for the local community.

3. *Care for employees' relationship*: Human resources management is an important practice for restaurants for both ethical and relational reasons, as well as because it offers an advantage in terms of customer satisfaction.

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TABLE 2 Example of sentence codification according to stakeholder approach.

Stakeholder approach	Instrumental	Normative
Example of sentence regarding suppliers	"We rather tend to buy the goods from mass retailers than have a single supplier because small and local suppliers either don't have the quantity or a competitive price. Only for specific things do we buy from local suppliers; for the most part, we can't do it" (Restaurant 32)	"The goal is also to help local productions to survive, be known and be appreciated. So, we restaurateurs, especially those who make quality, are the apex of a pyramid that has a larger base" (Restaurant 5)

Collaboration with local hotel schools: Many restaurants collaborate with local schools to attract personnel to join their staff and promote a culture of quality and sustainability in food service.

4. *Inclusiveness*: Both in staff recruitment (e.g., selecting disadvantaged people) and in structuring the menu (e.g., considering the needs of vegans and vegetarians), the theme of inclusiveness was common in many restaurants.
5. *Initiatives with local associations to promote charitable contributions*: Among the practices established by restaurants, attention to the community with charity actions recurred; many restaurants do it because they feel "they have to do it," but also because "it is a way to attract customers."

The analysis of restaurants' CSR practices highlighted that customers, employees, suppliers, and the community are the main stakeholders involved. The community refers to different types of stakeholders, such as other restaurants (usually seen as partners in common initiatives rather than as competitors), hotel schools, trade associations, charities, and municipal or nonprofit associations. From the interviews, we found that some practices often consider multiple stakeholders at the same time, for example, the restaurateurs' association that organizes training events to increase the culture of good food in the community and customers, the involvement of suppliers in environmental education toward customers and the promotion of seasonality, the education of hotel students and the transfer of sustainability culture. In total, 103 sentences were selected for the content analysis, with each practice involving at least a stakeholder category. Each sentence was analyzed in terms of stakeholder approach and categorized as either "instrumental" or "normative."

Table 3 presents a summary of the analysis.

The analysis showed how 64 (62%) sentences considered the stakeholders involved using a normative approach, while the remaining 39 (38%) sentences used an instrumental approach.

Moreover, Table 4 details the approaches used for each stakeholder category.

TABLE 3 Stakeholder approaches in the sentences selected.

Stakeholder approaches	*N* sentences	%
Instrumental	39	38
Normative	64	62
Total	103	100

TABLE 4 Stakeholder consideration and restaurants' approaches.

Stakeholder and approaches	*N* sentences	%
Community	47	46
Instrumental	10	22
Normative	37	68
Customer	24	23
Instrumental	11	46
Normative	13	54
Employee	19	18
Instrumental	8	42
Normative	11	58
Supplier	13	13
Instrumental	10	73
Normative	3	23
Total	103	100

A normative approach prevailed in all stakeholder categories except for the suppliers; in the community category, the normative approach was clearly prevalent, while in the customer and employee categories, the number of sentences per approach was similar.

Furthermore, from the sentences analyzed, we found that for 34% of respondents, both approaches coexisted for the different stakeholder categories.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the analysis, showing the practices performed, the stakeholders involved, and the approaches used. It also shows how each stakeholder is involved in multiple practices.

The suppliers are involved in the fight against food waste, the use of renewable energies, the consumption of resources, and the choice of local products. Employees are involved in resource consumption, relationship care, and inclusiveness. Customers are involved in the consumption of resources, the fight against food waste, and inclusiveness. Finally, the community is involved in the choice of local suppliers, the collaboration with schools, and the promotion of charity actions.

A description of each stakeholder category is given in the next subsections to provide a deeper understanding of stakeholders' considerations in the restaurants interviewed.

4.1 | Suppliers

When talking about their suppliers, the interviewees often used an instrumental approach. For example, the interviewee from Restaurant

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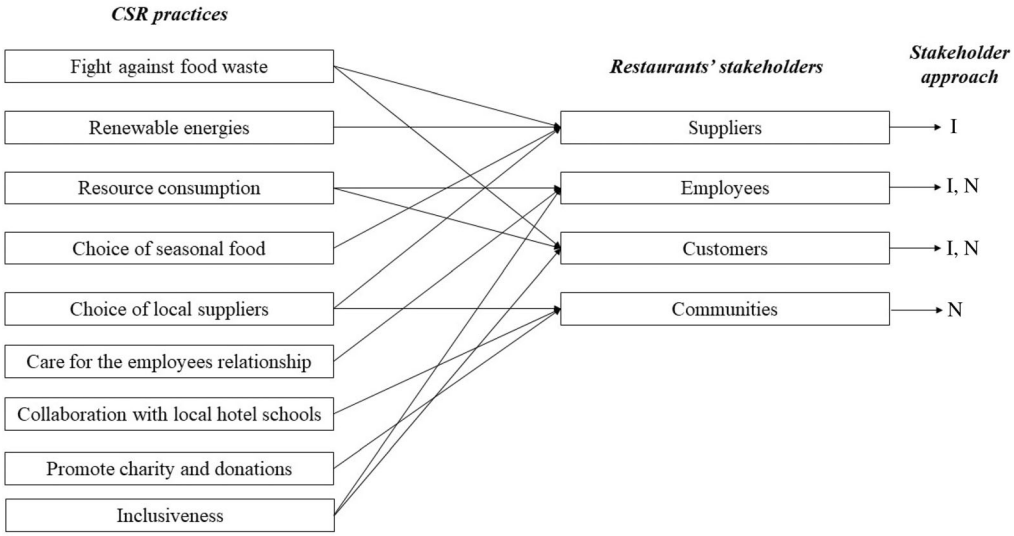

FIGURE 1 Restaurants' corporate social responsibility practices, stakeholders involved and approaches. I, instrumental; N, normative. *Source*: our elaboration.

4 explained how the choice to eliminate intermediation in the supply chain is not determined by the desire to get closer to the territory but by an economic factor:

> "We cut commercial intermediation; we have no agents. Let's go straight to the source. Where it is not possible because the company tells us that it only works through intermediaries, we do not make agreements. We tend to cut the intermediation that represents a cost"
>
> (Restaurant 4).

Moreover, even when the choice of suppliers is local, the main purpose of the choice remains economic, i.e., the indirect economic return deriving from spending in the territory:

> "Helping individual local producers also has an incredible return in terms of the general wealth of the territory itself. Of course, if you go to the local farmer, the local farmer will have some extra income; he can spend it in the area, he can go to the clothes shop, he can go from the clothes shop to another place. You have an economy linked to territory that is important."
>
> (Restaurant 21).

Few restaurateurs described an ethical or moral approach to supplier selection. Restauranteur 6 was among the few that chose suppliers and products to help the environment and people, regardless of the convenience of doing so:

> "I also declare to my clients that I do not take the certified products…I am absolutely not interested in that; I am going to see how this person works. (…) I prefer to give money to people who work only as farmers. This, for me, is being compatible with the environment and with the people"
>
> (Restaurant 6).

Even when dealing with similar practices, restaurateurs use different approaches with suppliers. The practice of choosing local food is driven by a normative approach when it is aimed at safeguarding the local economy and an instrumental approach when it is aimed at obtaining savings in procurement or indirect market advantages.

4.2 | Employees

Restaurateurs implement social practices to improve their relationships with their employees. Often, this relationship is driven by an instrumental purpose, following the logic "if I treat the employee well, he will treat my client well."

An interviewee from Restaurant 25 reported:

> "I can make a dish that is not perfect, but if it is explained and served in the right way with a smile (…), the passion is understood and shines through, and I achieve a certain result. Further: I can make the best possible dish, but if it is not appreciated, if the customer's feedback is not followed, the result outside is absolutely not valued"
>
> (Restaurant 25).

However, this was not true for all the interviewees. Some of them take care of the relationship because they believe it is the right thing to do in an ethical sense:

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> 'It is necessary to save some values and principles for people, a different way of being together, even if it can be challenging. Finding a moment to drink tea together (or a beer in the evening) has a symbolic value that means "I'm not here just to work"'
>
> (Restaurant 36).

Other social practices are implemented involving employees, for example, some restaurateurs induce in their employees the capability to fight food waste by increasing awareness about the portion of food to offer or the careful use of resources. The words of the interviewee from Restaurant 9 indicate a normative approach:

> "I always try to make my employees understand that it's nice to feel good, but we must always bear in mind that there are people who live in worse conditions. Therefore, waste due to carelessness hurts me a lot. More than hurting my wallet, it hurts me morally because there are people for which two drops of water can make the difference"
>
> (Restaurant 9).

Other examples of practices driven by a normative approach with employees, such as offering work to disadvantaged or needy people, were observed.

4.3 | Customers

Three main practices involved the customers: the responsible use of resources, the fight against waste, and inclusiveness. The interviewee from Restaurant 33 described an instrumental approach because stimulating customers to take home what they did not eat is part of a sales strategy that entails abundant portions as a competitive advantage:

> "Offering abundant dishes is a winning formula from a commercial point of view. Then we have to encourage customers to take home" (Restaurant 33).

Contrastingly, the interviewee from Restaurant 15, through a normative approach, explained how "food thrown away is a waste; there are people who can't afford it."

Moreover, in many interviews, the issue of the satisfaction of vegans and vegetarians emerged; different perspectives were observed as some restaurants proposed a vegan/vegetarian menu with an instrumental approach (e.g., to intercept customers) while others followed a normative one (e.g., to satisfy a social need). The issue of inclusiveness was also present from the perspective of the "right" price. In Restaurant 11, the interviewee said they tried to offer a fair price to their customers that was also remunerative for the stakeholders involved in the value chain:

> 'We want to be an affordable restaurant where you can spend 50–60 euros on the tasting menu. This implies respect for the customer, as well as respect for the producers and the workers who collaborate with us, whose fair remunerations should be included in the price the customer pays. This is the price we would pay too when we go out. I always say, "I am a customer of myself"'
>
> (Restaurant 11).

Regarding the choice of local products, the restaurateur from Restaurant 13 stated the importance of educating customers about the culture of quality and seasonal food and how employee engagement is pivotal in this consciousness purpose:

> "You can have all the good raw materials you want, but if you are not able to communicate it, it is the same thing as selling average raw materials. The truth is that quality can be found almost everywhere. We try to educate the customer. (…) The products are good, but the important thing is how to communicate it. The team is fundamental for the message and should be trained for that. To give a quality message, the group must also be of quality, like the raw material"
>
> (Restaurant 13).

Finally, some restaurateurs reflected on the profession of the restaurateur itself. Restaurant 9's interviewee explained, through a normative approach, how the evolution of the profession itself is not linked to the possibility of making profits but rather to the service being rendered to the customers:

> 'For us entrepreneurs in this sector, satisfaction is no longer measured by economic results but more by customer satisfaction. I am interested in the customer saying, "I ate well; I was fine, and I feel good," and consequently going out satisfied. That is our greatest satisfaction' (Restaurant 9).

4.4 | Communities

The community was one of the most cited stakeholders in the interviews; almost half of the selected sentences refer to it. The community comprises subcategories of different stakeholders, such as other restaurants, hotel schools, trade associations, charities, and municipal associations. The restaurateurs' approach was mostly normative; only a few of them had an instrumental approach, for which taking beneficial actions toward society is advantageous. For example, the interviewee from Restaurant 6 stated how they organized charity events to "create movement" and attract new customers:

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> "When you promote a social activity that takes place in the area, you bring a thousand people here. As they know you're there, they keep coming. A few years ago, during a social event, we exhibited giant hearts for Valentine's Day. Will you ask me what Valentine's Day has to do with a social cause? It has to do with it because you've created a situation that people ask for (…), and you've created a situation where you work with people. (…) These are things that come back; a situation is created in which you feel good and make others feel good."
>
> (Restaurant 6).

Notwithstanding the presence of an instrumental approach in a few restaurants, the majority undertook charitable actions without expecting anything in return and only intended to transfer knowledge and education on social sustainability and inclusion. In this sense, the words of the interviewee from Restaurant 5 are interesting:

> "The idea was to work with the restaurant industry to do a lot of social activities, to make people aware of what is a sustainable economy and what are ethical and healthy food behaviors (…). We organized various activities with the children; we did cooking classes and book presentations. Various interesting stimuli come to us"
>
> (Restaurant 5).

Not all the interviewees reported the beneficial actions they took. To understand why charity information is sometimes not disclosed, Restaurant 9 said:

> "If I can do something good in life, I do it without talking about it or flaunting it; telling it means that there was self-interest at the root"
>
> (Restaurant 9).

Finally, the collaboration with the hotel schools is a useful tool to educate young people and transfer knowledge about sustainability:

> "I have some boys from the school who came for an internship. It's nice because it means that I can also create something on a personal relationship level and therefore also teach them to respect the nature that surrounds us, for the raw materials, for our work and that of the others around us"
>
> (Restaurant 20).

In activities involving the community, like charity, inclusion, and collaboration with hotel schools, the normative approach is predominant. Restauranteurs carry out these activities to follow their ethical principles and to raise awareness, transfer knowledge, and educate.

5 | DISCUSSION

Through face-to-face interviews with 41 Italian restaurant managers/owners, this study investigated the stakeholders addressed by restaurants' sustainability practices and the nature of their relationship, distinguishing between instrumental and normative approaches (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Qian et al., 2020).

As the first result, answering RQ1, the study shows the main practices implemented by the restaurants (see Figure 1). Differently from what was pointed out in some previous literature (Clarke & Chen, 2007), we found that restaurateurs perform several CSR practices addressed to both environmental issues (e.g., fight against food waste, use of renewable energies, and reduction of resource consumption) and societal challenges (e.g., care for employees relationship, collaboration with local hotel schools, initiatives with local associations to promote charity and initiatives to promote inclusiveness). Many social practices are aimed at the community and considered fundamental for a strategy oriented toward sustainability, confirming the results of Mejia et al. (2022).

Nonetheless, when comparing the adopted practices with UN SDGs, some issues appear neglected. For example, equal opportunity actions or practices for the reduction of GHG emissions did not emerge from the narrative, indicating that SDGs 5, "Gender Equality," and 13, "Climate Action," are not at the top of restaurants' consideration. Furthermore, among the CSR practices developed, sustainability reporting was never mentioned, indicating that most restaurateurs miss the potential benefits deriving from sustainability reporting for stakeholders' management and engagement (Herremans et al., 2016).

As a second result, answering RQ2, the main stakeholders' categories involved in restaurant sustainability management emerged: customers, employees, suppliers, and the community, adding some novelty elements compared with previous literature (Kaur et al., 2022). In particular, the study opened the "black box" of the community category and showed that it included mainly other restaurants, hotel schools, trade associations, charities, and municipal associations.

Regarding the nature of the relationship between restaurants and stakeholders, the study found that generally, the normative approach prevails regarding employees, customers, and the community. In contrast, the instrumental approach dominates the relationship between the restaurants and the suppliers.

Furthermore, the study highlights how the normative and instrumental approaches can coexist within the same restaurant: 34% of respondents managed stakeholders' relationships by adopting both a normative and instrumental approach, depending on the specific stakeholder category. The coexistence of the two approaches sheds light on the complexity of the motivations that drive restaurants' relationships with their stakeholders (Steurer, 2006; Valentinov & Hajdu, 2021) and the adoption of a specific set of CSR practices. Although ethical considerations usually drive restaurateurs, they clearly bear in mind the possibility of transforming social and environmental practices into opportunities, confirming a business case approach (Schaltegger et al., 2019). While the normative approach

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responds to long-term orientation, the vision of the firm, and its constant search for legitimacy (Valentinov & Hajdu, 2021), the concurring instrumental approach appears more focused on short-term results.

Another novel finding concerns the relationships between different categories of stakeholders within the described sustainability initiatives. Some restaurateurs highlighted the need to sensitize customers about local food or small suppliers that share a common sustainability vision with the restaurant. Further examples of stakeholders' intersections are the education of present and prospective employees (e.g., the students doing internships) on green practices, which should consistently be shared with the customers (e.g., the use of doggy bags and the story-telling behind each dish that is served), or the organization of common events with other restaurants where associations or local producers can promote their activities in the local community. This finding confirmed the reflection of de Visser-Amundson (2022), who stated that restaurants achieve their CSR objectives through collaboration and partnership, developing SDG 17 and as happens in other sectors and contexts where stakeholders show an active role in defining sustainability practices (Airike et al., 2016; Hossain et al., 2023; Phiri et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is evidence of a wider conception of the business case for sustainability that can benefit both the company's business, the stakeholders involved, and the society at large, as suggested by Busch et al. (2024).

As explained by Hossain et al. (2023), the alignment of the interests of multiple stakeholders allows for better results to be achieved: a concrete example is the raising awareness of food waste by restaurants, which, in turn, will raise awareness among customers. The restaurant-employee-customer alignment allows for better success in fighting the waste of resources (in this case, with the practices of "right portion" and the "doggy bag"). Regarding the stakeholder approach, sometimes, the multiple-stakeholder consideration is also combined with the coexistence of the two stakeholder approaches, where a normative approach to one stakeholder leads to an instrumental approach to another: an example is the valorization of local products in the dishes offered to customers. Some interviewees declared that they wanted to promote their territory because they believe local traditions and foods are important, advertising small producers and suppliers: in this case, the purpose of the practice is normative and is aimed at the community (in the broad sense) and local suppliers. However, this practice represents an opportunity for the restaurant to offer a distinctive dish characterized by local products, history, and tradition, characteristics that some customers appreciate, bringing an advantage to the restaurant (instrumental approach). According to Valentinov and Hajdu (2021), the coexistence of the two approaches appears to be a consequence of society's complexity; this study adds further insights by depicting the complexity in the intersection between firm motivations and stakeholder relationships.

The examples mentioned above recall the issues of "education" and "awareness," which represent firms' attitudes toward disseminating a shared sustainability culture. In most cases, different stakeholders are required to cooperate in terms of initiatives, and restaurateurs' approach toward them is both instrumental and normative because the idea of sharing common values of sustainability (normative intent) is paired with the idea of improving the satisfaction of stakeholders, thus producing advantage for both the firm and the stakeholders. This seems to be particularly relevant concerning customers for which the education and consciousness attitudes simultaneously reinforce the ethical side of the relationship and improve the loyalty of customers who share the same values and ideals (Alonso et al., 2018; Hanks & Mattila, 2016; Lo et al., 2020). This educational perspective seems to characterize restaurants that have a broader and more synergic vision of stakeholders' relationships, similar to what suggested by Busch et al. (2024), and witnesses the complementarity of normative and instrumental approaches as suggested by Valentinov and Hajdu (2021).

6 | CONCLUSION

Sustainability is gaining momentum in every field of business, including the restaurant sector. According to Wang et al. (2013), the restaurant sector was found to be one of the least sustainable economic industries because of critical issues, such as food waste (Cochran et al., 2018) and plastic pollution (Tenenbaum, 2019). More recently, restaurants have become increasingly aware of their environmental and social responsibilities.

The literature addressing restaurants' approach to CSR is growing along with the importance of sustainability issues (Cantele & Cassia, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017). However, while the literature has extensively addressed environmental issues and related practices (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017; Davies & Konisky, 2000; Tan et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013), few studies have addressed restaurant social sustainability practices through the lens of stakeholder consideration (Kaur et al., 2022). In particular, research is lacking in exploring restaurant–stakeholder relationships using a qualitative and narrative approach (Kaur et al., 2022).

Theoretically, this study broadens the speculative debate around CSR implementation in the restaurant sector by introducing some elements of novelty. First, the study extends the set of stakeholders analyzed, adding the community to the most studied ones (customers, employees, and suppliers). The local community had a significant presence in the CSR initiatives reported by the restaurateurs, and their description led to a deeper understanding of what subcategories of stakeholders (other restaurants, hotel schools, trade associations, charities, and municipal associations) are summarized in the generic word "community." Second, analyses in this study were made through a narrative and qualitative perspective, allowing for a better comprehension of the complex relationship between restaurants and their stakeholders (Kaur et al., 2022); this differs from previous research that mainly used quantitative analysis. In particular, the search for the stakeholder approach (normative or instrumental) through the lens of sustainability practices implementation added new insights into an industry where this kind of analysis was lacking. The set of CSR practices analyzed in restaurants should not be seen as a contribution in terms of best practices in the industry but also revealed some

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neglected issues that could stray the path to complete sustainable development (e.g., gender equality).

Moreover, the discussion shows that sustainable restaurants use both approaches toward different stakeholders. Sometimes, the two approaches coexist in the same restaurant and specific initiatives, especially when collaborating between two or more stakeholder categories. This result allows us to offer empirical evidence of the collaboration between stakeholders discussed by Busch et al. (2024): the normative approach is fundamental to enable sustainability practices that address common aims but which do not imply immediate advantages to the firm and stakeholders involved, and in this sense, it is complementary to the instrumental approach. In theoretical terms, the business case for sustainability can evolve by considering the interests of all stakeholders—and thus the society at large—(Busch et al., 2024; Schaltegger et al., 2019), but an ethical and value-based approach is crucial to create an alignment of values and interests between the company and the stakeholders involved, moving toward an "all stakeholders win" approach and creating multi-sided collaborations (Hossain et al., 2023; Phiri et al., 2019). These kinds of collaboration with stakeholders can lead to the consideration of sustainability objectives that are outside the company's competitive context (Porter & Kramer, 2006): the role of policymakers, in this sense, becomes crucial in stimulating collaborations in practices where the individual interest of the firm or of a specific category of stakeholder would not be enough to reach a higher level of sustainable development.

Regarding managerial implications, the study provides practitioners and managers with a new perspective to better comprehend and evaluate the implementation of CSR practices within the restaurant sector. Examples of material environmental and social issues have been given so that restaurant owners and managers can be inspired by a list of good practices when deciding on future activities to improve their sustainability performance. In addition, CSR good practices not currently spread were highlighted, such as gender equality actions, the reduction of GHG emissions, and the development of sustainability reporting: the implementation of these practices could represent a critical success factor to obtain a differentiation competitive advantage in the restaurant sector. Moreover, the issue of collaboration emerged as a critical success factor in stakeholder relationships, whether dyadic (restaurant and a single stakeholder group) or multisided (restaurant and different stakeholder groups), confirming the findings of de Visser-Amundson (2022) and Rahmawati et al. (2019). Therefore, the ability to create relationships represents a valuable managerial soft skill to enable collaboration with and between stakeholders. According to Hossain et al. (2023), another relevant managerial skill is the ability to intercept the alignment of interests of stakeholders to achieve common sustainability objectives. An example in the restaurant context is the promotion of initiatives in the local area by intercepting the interest of the local community in the promotion of the territory, of cultural associations in promoting their aims, and of other restaurants to enlarge their potential patronage. Effective external communication is essential so that corporate values can be transmitted and an alignment of values and interests with stakeholders can be created; however, the study has highlighted how the practice of sustainability reporting is largely neglected. Restaurant managers should focus more on developing reporting forms that can effectively communicate the restaurant's values and the sustainability practices implemented.

According to Qian et al. (2020), the study could also have policy implications related to initiatives that policymakers could design to improve the sustainability behavior of restaurants. In particular, considering the pivotal role of the normative approach, an improvement in sustainability implementation could be reached by developing recommendations aimed at spreading the cultural and ethical side of sustainability instead of mandatory requests that risk being perceived as just specific tasks to accomplish. Guidelines or codes of conduct should be shared with different categories of stakeholders, as restaurants have already demonstrated a willingness to cooperate for sustainability. The effects of these initiatives increase when they are shared, as stakeholders feel more involved and, therefore, committed, with positive outcomes also in terms of restaurants' legitimation. For this reason, to increase knowledge of CSR practices among restaurateurs, policymakers should develop training and awareness-raising actions on these issues to reach an increasingly large audience. Furthermore, to heighten the impact of social practices, community projects could be encouraged at the local level, where different stakeholders (i.e., municipalities, trade associations, and restaurateurs) could collaborate to promote shared sustainability initiatives. Finally, practices implemented with a combined approach tend to "free" more value for society compared with practices implemented with a strictly instrumental approach. So, to promote sustainability objectives that affect society and the community in general, and not only the competitive context of restaurants, policymakers should incentivize partnerships for sustainability projects to enable "all stakeholders win" situations (Busch et al., 2024).

This study has some limitations. First, it focused entirely on the Italian context. Future research should extend the analysis to other countries where the sustainability approach and restaurant practices could differ. Another limitation is that sustainability practices and stakeholder approaches were observed in a limited portion of time, without the possibility of studying the ongoing process of sustainability implementation and stakeholder consideration. Further studies could trace the evolution of the stakeholder approach over time through a longitudinal and in-depth case study analysis. Furthermore, the study highlighted that some CSR issues (gender equality, reduction of emissions, and sustainability reporting) were less implemented without investigating the reasons behind this lack of attention. Future studies could cover this gap by focusing on fewer spread practices and analyzing the motivations toward or against their consideration in restaurants.

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APPENDIX A: Example of questions proposed in the open interviews.

No.	Questions
1.	What types of environmental practices are implemented in your restaurant?
2.	What types of social practices are implemented in your restaurant?
3.	Where are your main suppliers located?
4.	What are the environmental practices (for example, reducing resource consumption) that involve your customers?
5.	What activities does the restaurant carry out for the community?
6.	What is the relationship with hotel schools? Are the students hired as workers?
7.	Do you monitor the consumption of energy or water resources to reduce them?
8.	What is the relationship with other restaurants in the area? Do you network together?
9.	Do you do charity? If yes, why? Do you disclose it?
10.	Do you inform your customers about local products? Do you have local partners that you promote? If so, do you think it is seen as added value by the customer?

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