Why do cooperatives assure their CSR reports? An analysis of the motivations and benefits in a big retail cooperative

Elies Seguí-Mas
Helena María Bollas-Araya
Paula Asensi Peiró
Universitat Politècnica de València

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ABSTRACT

CSR reporting is increasing worldwide and cooperatives are highly susceptible to it. However, there is an interesting research gap in CSR reporting and assurance in cooperatives. Through an in-depth case study, we investigated motivations, benefits and singularities to adopt assurance practices in one of the biggest cooperatives in the Spanish retail sector, which is listed among the world's top 300 cooperatives. Our results showed that the cooperative ideology and values (transparency, trust) were the main motivation to assure a CSR report in a company. This study underlines the improvement of stakeholders' engagement and greater reliability among stakeholders as benefits of these policies. Finally, the relevant barriers to assure a CSR report are difficulties that stakeholders have understanding it and its cost.

KEY WORDS: CSR, Sustainability, Assurance, Cooperatives.

ECONLIT DESCRIPTORS: L81, M14, M40, P13, Q56.

Correspondence: Elies Seguí-Mas, esegui@cegea.upv.es; Helena María Bollas-Araya, hebolar@ade.upv.es, and Paula Asensi Peiró, pauaspei@ade.upv.es, CEGEA - Centre of Business Management Research, Universitat Politècnica de València.

¿Por qué las cooperativas verifican sus informes de RSC? Un análisis de las motivaciones y beneficios en una gran cooperativa del sector de la distribución comercial

RESUMEN: La emisión de informes de RSC se está incrementado en todo el mundo y las cooperativas son altamente susceptibles a la misma. Sin embargo, existe una interesante laguna en cuanto a la investigación de la emisión de informes de RSC y su verificación en cooperativas. A través del estudio de un caso en profundidad, investigamos las motivaciones, beneficios y singularidades de la verificación en una de las cooperativas españolas más grandes del sector de la distribución comercial, que se encuentra entre las 300 cooperativas más grandes del mundo. Nuestros resultados mostraron que la ideología de la cooperativa y sus valores (transparencia, confianza) fueron la principal motivación para verificar el informe de RSC. Este estudio subraya la mejora del compromiso con los grupos de interés y una mayor fiabilidad como beneficio de estas políticas. Finalmente, las barreras relevantes para verificar un informe de RSC son las dificultades que suponen para los grupos de interés el entendimiento de esta práctica, y sus costes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: RSC, Sostenibilidad, Verificación, Cooperativas.

1.- Introduction

In the last decades, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting has proliferated in response to stakeholders' concerns about environmental and social issues, governance and responsibility (Kolk and Perego, 2010; Simnett, 2012).

However, researchers have criticised this practice for its lack of accountability and transparency (Owen et al., 2000; Dando and Swift, 2003; Adams and Evans, 2004), which have created a need for credible reported information in this area, known as the so-called '*credibility gap'*. Consequently, some companies have started to adopt voluntary external assurance, which enhances the credibility of CSR reports (Adams and Evans, 2004; Simnett, 2012).

In general, most studies have analysed sustainability reporting and assurance in corporations, showing little effort to study these practices from the perspective of cooperative organisations, which identifies an interesting gap in this research area (Bollas-Araya and Seguí-Mas, 2014; Seguí-Mas et al., 2015). From an empirical perspective, Cornelius et al. (2008) argued that CSR is a key consideration for all social enterprises (e.g. cooperatives). So, it is timely to investigate their practices and whether they are subject to the same requirements as stock companies (Emanuele and Higgins, 2000).

The three dimensions that includes CSR (economic, social and environmental) are very present in cooperative organisations, since they are governed by principles and values that take full these three dimensions (Puentes and Velasco, 2009). According to Belhouari et al. (2005), CSR is not a challenge for these organisations, but is an integral part of its values and its operational dynamics. In this line, our research focuses on the special case of cooperatives.

This paper reports the assurance characteristics of one of the biggest Spanish cooperatives. It belongs to the retail industry and is a pioneer as far as CSR policies are concerned. Specifically, we seek to shed light on the motivations and barriers to adopt assurance, and on the quality of their assurance reports.

The paper is organised as follows: firstly, we present a literature review. In the following section, we describe the research method employed. Then we present the results of our analysis. Finally, we offer a discussion and our conclusions.

2.- Literature review

2.1. Assurance of CSR reports

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting is the process through which organisations communicate the social and environmental effects of their economic actions to stakeholders within society and to society at large (Gray et al., 1996). It has commonly been understood as a way of ensuring the legitimacy of organisations, a tool to manage stakeholder relationships, or a process to build good impressions and/or to hide conflicts (Spence and Gray, 2007). According to ACCA (2001), it is the main way by which companies can show their corporate legitimacy to stakeholders.

Years ago, no generally accepted standard ruled sustainability reporting (Simnett, 2012), but nowadays there are some standards that ensure the homogeneity and quality of sustainability reports. The most widely used reporting standard in practice is the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines from the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). The first version of the Guidelines was published in 2000. It has been subject to revision in order to improve and update its content, leading to the emergence of new versions. Thus, in 2002, GRI published the version G2, the version G3 appears in 2006, the version G3.1 was issued in 2011, and the most current version is the G4 Guidelines, launched in 2013.

Despite the increase on sustainability reporting, CSR reporting is subject to concerns as regards to the completeness and credibility of the provided information (Adams and Evans, 2004; Adams, 2004; Dando and Swift, 2003). Enterprises disclose only appropriate information to gain corporate advantage and a good reputation instead of looking for transparency and accountability for stakeholders (Owen et al., 2000). Moreover, some stakeholders have demanded more transparency and questioned the integrity of the information published (Laufer, 2003; Moneva et al., 2006; Ramus and Montiel, 2005). Consequently, some companies have started to adopt external assurance to enhance their credibility towards their stakeholders (Perego and Kolk, 2012).

Independent experts, who provide assurance on the content and structure of CSR reports, is a method typically used to enhance their relevance, reliability and comparability; that is, to improve their credibility (Simnett, 2012). The voluntary adoption of assurance can be explained by firms' willingness to enhance this credibility in the face of stakeholders (Perego and Kolk, 2012).

The need for the credibility of CSR reporting has accelerated the development of relevant assurance frameworks. The two main standards applied by assurance providers in performing assurance engagements on CSR reporting are the AA1000 Assurance Standard (AA1000AS) of AccountAbility and ISAE 3000 of the International Auditing and Assurance Standards Board (IAASB). A combina-

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tion of both is likely to provide improved results because they are complementary in terms of providing a comprehensive and robust assurance process that should satisfy the needs of both management and other stakeholders (Accountability and KPMG, 2005).

Previous studies have investigated about the determinants that influence adoption of assurance and factors for choosing an assurance provider. Using a sample of 2,113 companies (from 31 countries) between 2002-2004, Simnett et al. (2009) found that the companies located in stakeholder-oriented countries are more likely to adopt assurance and to choose assurance from the auditing profession. Their results also showed that adoption of assurance was more commonplace among the companies engaged in more highly visible industrial activity, and those with a larger 'social footprint'. They also pointed out that large companies were more likely to not only have their CSR reports assured, but to also choose an accountant as an assurance provider. Moreover, they found that accountant auditors are more likely to be assurance providers of companies with less leverage. Kolk and Perego (2010) analysed the behaviour of G250 firms for the years 1999, 2002 and 2005, and found that the likelihood of adopting assurance was greater for firms domiciled in countries that are stakeholder-oriented. On the other hand, the likelihood of choosing a large accounting firm as an assurance provider increased for companies domiciled in shareholder-oriented countries and for large firms. Zorio et al. (2013) focused on the companies listed on the Spanish capital market between 2005 and 2010. They underlined inclusion in IBEX-35 (the benchmark stock market index of Spanish capital markets) and industry as other determinants to apply assurance and to hire an assuror. They also found that size significantly explain assurance. Meanwhile, Sierra et al. (2013) focused on the IBEX-35 companies and found that the decision to adopt assurance depend on company size, and it is positively associated with ROA and negatively associated with ROE and leverage. Their results also show that certain industries (such as oil and energy, basic materials, and financial services) significantly tended to hire auditors as assurance providers. With their sample of Portuguese firms between 2008 and 2011, Castelo et al. (2014) pointed out that industrial affiliation is another determinant to adopt assurance. Their results showed that as company size and profitability increased, companies were more likely to apply assurance, whereas the reverse happened for leverage. They also revealed that listed companies were less likely to have their sustainability reports assured.

On the other hand, Park and Brorson (2005) interviewed 28 Swedish companies on the decision to adopt or not assurance. Their research reveals that assurance is considered beneficial as a tool to develop internal reporting systems and create more rigorous reports. However, it is not considered that it results in an increase of credibility. Some areas for improvement would be the emphasis of providers to establish precise definitions of the assurance scope, the application of generally accepted guidelines and criteria, and regulators and providers should pay more attention to the needs of stakeholders. Similarly, Jones and Solomon (2010) asked CSR representatives from 20 UK listed companies about the need to assure sustainability reports. Half of the respondents believed that external assurance enhances the credibility and trust, while the other half thought it was not necessary because they saw it as a management tool, useful for checking the efficiency of internal control systems management, rather than as a mechanism to improve corporate accountability to stakeholders and build credibility and trust.

Hodge et al. (2009) aimed to study the impact of assurance reports on user confidence in CSR reports. They noted that users place more confidence in CSR reports when the level of assurance provided is reasonable/high, and when a top tier accountancy firm provides such assurance, rather than when a specialist consultant provides assurance. No such difference was found when the provided level of assurance was limited/low for either type of assurance provider group. Pflugrath et al. (2011) investigated whether financial analysts from Australia, United States and the United Kingdom perceived any difference in the credibility of sustainability reports based on whether or not they were assured as well as the type of provider. Their results show that analysts, especially those from the United States, felt that the credibility of a sustainability report is greater when it is assured by an accountant. Cho et al. (2014) found that US investors do not perceive that assurance add any value to the company. While this may be because most of their sample reports had been assured by providers outside the auditing profession.

Other research works have shown that different CSR assurance approaches are taken among assurors. O'Dwyer and Owen (2005) analysed the assurance reports included in sustainability reports nominated for the 2002 ACCA Sustainability Reporting Awards, and they noted that assurors from the accounting profession are more likely than consultants to indicate the level of assurance. However, it seems that accountants apply a more conservative, cautious and limited approach to provide low levels of assurance, while consultants apply a more evaluative approach, and it seems that they provide a higher level of assurance. On the other hand, there are more references to standards by consultants and they are also the forerunners in the use of AA1000AS standard. Conversely, the criteria used by accountants are generally stated as reflecting emerging best practice together with the underlying principles within international standards. Hassan et al. (2005) conducted a survey of 110 audit firms from 11 countries and found that many of the assurance services provided a limited/moderate level of assurance rather than a reasonable/high level, due to the nature of the case, the lack of appropriate criteria or standards, considerations of cost/benefit, the lack of proper evidence and the needs of users. Deegan et al. (2006) investigated whether a sample of English and European assurance reports included the key elements suggested by GRI and the *Fédération des Experts Comptables Européens* (FEE), and they found significant variability in presentation formats and contents across assurors. Using a sample of companies from different countries, that issued sustainability reports for the periods 2002-2004 and 2006-2007, respectively, Mock et al. (2007, 2013) noted that a key factor associated with the level of assurance is the type of provider. Their findings revealed that, unlike other types of providers, the Big-4 audit firms are more likely to provide a lower level of assurance. In addition, they are more likely to specify the standard used, tending to employ international standards (such as the ISAE 3000) and national or local standards, while other providers are more inclined to the AA1000AS. Their results also reveal that the Big-4 firms are less likely to include recommendations in their assurance reports.

Regarding stakeholder engagement, results indicate a continuing trend, which reflects that stakeholder involvement is lacking in assurance (Adams, 2004; Adams and Evans, 2004; O'Dwyer and Owen, 2005, 2007; Manetti and Becatti, 2009). The literature provides clear indications about the need to increase stakeholder involvement and participation in CSR reporting processes (Manetti and Toccafondi,

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2012). O'Dwyer and Owen (2005) raised many doubts about the intention of assurance providers to involve stakeholders in assurance processes. These same authors (2007) revisited the assurance quality problem and found the continued absence of stakeholder involvement and a tendency to minimise expectations through extensive scope limitations, among others. Conversely, Manetti and Toccafondi (2012) confirmed that stakeholders are increasingly being incorporated into all the CSR reporting assurance process stages, despite the emerging nature of such stakeholder inclusivity.

Some scholars have assessed the quality of assurance reports and found differences by country, sector and provider. Perego (2009) analysed the firms listed for the 2005 ACCA Sustainability Reporting Awards, and provided evidence that Big-4 firms positively affect assurance quality in terms of reporting format and assurance procedures. In contrast, the quality of the recommendations and opinions in an assurance statement is positively associated with non-accountant assurance providers. Perego and Kolk (2012) studied assurance practices among G250 companies, and they evidenced a wide variability with firms in particular countries with regular improvement, while the rest exhibited an irregular trend. They showed that assurance quality also differed according to sectors, with more polluting sectors having the highest scores. Zorio et al. (2013), Fernández-Feijóo et al. (2012) and Romero et al. (2010) analysed assurance among Spanish companies and indicated that the quality is significantly higher when assurance is provided by an auditor.

2.2. CSR and cooperatives

CSR implies a business approach, where the strategic objective of the company expands to the pursuit of value for all stakeholders. This approach is not new to cooperative organisations, but is an intrinsic model to their nature. The pivotal role of their members (shareholder, customer, provider, employee, etc.) causes them to assume different roles as stakeholders, facilitating the development of CSR, which possess the ability to integrate the needs of themselves and to establish solid relationships with them based on participation (Vargas and Vaca, 2005).

The communication from the European Commission about the social responsibility of companies (2002) states that "cooperatives, mutuals and associations as membership-led organisations have a long tradition in combining economic viability with social responsibility. They ensure this through stakeholder dialogue and participative management and thus can provide an important reference to other organisations". Thus, it is clear that CSR is nothing new for cooperatives, becoming exponents of social responsibility (Mozas and Puentes, 2010) or as noted Castro (2006), a "CSR model."

Cooperatives are entities with a particular nature in which CSR is essential for the way they operate. Thus the 'Cooperative Identity' definition adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) in 1995 is a first approach to cooperatives' socially responsible behaviour (Server and Capó, 2011).

"A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (ICA, 1995). In this definition, we can see matters related to CSR, but the relationship between the cooperative movement and CSR is more clearly in the cooperative values (Carrasco, 2007) of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. These values are put into practice by the cooperative principles: voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, cooperation among cooperatives, concern for community.

In particular, three of these principles unequivocally remind us of CSR-related matters. The fifth principle (education, training and information) states that cooperatives have to provide their partners and workers with education. The sixth principle (cooperation between cooperatives) states that cooperatives serve their partners as efficiently as possible by working in local, regional, national and international structures. The seventh principle (concern for community) specifies that cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities. Therefore, cooperatives' commitment with the community, workers and the environment is clear (since it confirms the compromise with CSR) (Carrasco, 2007).

Belhouari et al. (2005) argue that the internalization of CSR by cooperatives is based on both specific values and principles, as in the business configuration. Monitoring of cooperative principles leads cooperative organisations to carry out their activities with the aim of meeting the needs and concerns of its members and other stakeholders, such as the local community, employees, suppliers and customers, other cooperatives, and society in general. Their nature makes them to develop their business in a responsible manner, contributing to the development of the community or location where they are installed, without compromising their economic viability (Puentes and Velasco, 2009).

In short, CSR has numerous points in common with the cooperative values and principles (Server and Capó, 2009, 2011) and therefore it constitutes an inherent ideology of cooperatives (Mozas and Puentes, 2010).

The European Commission (2012) states that the long-term goal of cooperatives is achieving economic and social sustainability through empowering people, anticipating changes and optimizing the use of resources. It encourages, therefore, the involvement of cooperatives in the paradigm of CSR (Heras and Arana, 2013), because, cooperatives have a road traveled in this area, which puts them in a better strategic position (Collado, 2006).

Seguí-Mas et al. (2015) analysed assurance from the point of view of large cooperative and mutual organisations. Their results show that neither the country nor the sector have significant differences in terms of the decision to assure a sustainability report. By contrast, both factors are significantly related to the choice of assuror. Specifically, in stakeholder-oriented countries, organisations show a preference for accountants, while in shareholder-oriented countries prefer other providers. Similarly, coop-

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erative and mutual organisations operating in sensitive sectors opt for accountants, while those operating in non-sensitive sectors choose other providers. On the other hand, the study also points out differences in the quality of the assurance reports by country, sector and type of provider. Thus, organisations from shareholder-oriented countries, sensitive sectors and those opting by accountants get a higher level of quality.

In this line we focus our research on a big Spanish cooperative of the retail industry aiming to shed light onto its motivations and barriers to adopt assurance, and to determine the impact on the quality of their assurance statements. Accordingly, we formulated the following research questions: What are the motivations and benefits for cooperatives during the assurance process? What are the main barriers? Are there any impacts in quality terms on assurance process?

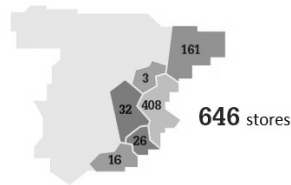# 3.- Research setting and methods

3.1. Research setting: The Consum Cooperative

Consum was born in 1975 with 600 consumer members, and is currently the biggest Valencian cooperative. Its evolution has been characterised by continuous growth, and it is currently one of the biggest companies in the Spanish Retail sector. In 1981 Consum also became a worker cooperative, and in 1987 it began its expansion in Valencia and Catalonia by means of several mergers.

An important milestone occurred in 1990 when Consum merged with Eroski (the Mondragon's Consumer Cooperative). This union lasted until 2004, when Consum decided to disengage due to differences in the business model.

Over the last decade, Consum has continued its expansion throughout the Spanish Mediterranean Region (Valencia, Catalonia, Aragon, Murcia, Castilla-La Mancha and Andalusia). Currently, Consum has 646 supermarkets, three logistics platforms, 11,500 employees and more than 2,400,000 consumer members.
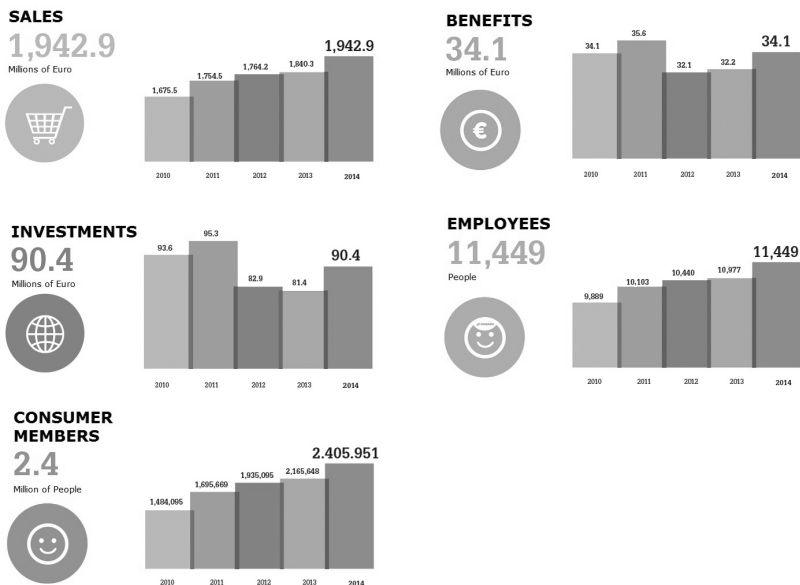
Figure 1. Distribution of Consum's supermarkets

SOURCE: Consum (2015).

By means of a strategic approach, Consum has developed its mission, vision and corporate values. Consum wishes to satisfy its customers and members through purchases that offer quality, variety, price and service, based on its employees' attention and commitment. Regarding its vision, Consum wishes to be an independent cooperative that is innovative, honest and sustainable, where customers have the capacity of choice and good prices. Its values include listening to customers, employees, suppliers and the environment, and providing products, training, information, health, development and sustainability and responsibility with commitment, honesty and respect (Consum 2015). Figure 2 shows an overview of Consum, which is what our research has focused on.

Figure 2. The cooperative's key data (2014)

SOURCE: Consum (2015).

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Consum Social Responsibility Policy is integrated with its other policies, such as Quality Policy, Health and Safety policy, Environmental Policy, and also with its commitments with Gender Equality and Family-Responsible companies. Thus the CSR report is one of its main communication channels with its stakeholders. The cooperative CSR Committee, where all the departments are represented, prepares the CSR report. All the departments work on the report and contribute with specific indicators. The measuring techniques for indicators follow the ultimate GRI protocols, and also incorporate specific social economy and company indicators.

Consum has disclosed CSR reports since 2006, when only 20 Spanish companies and five cooperatives around the world disclosed CSR reports. The cooperative has used the most current GRI standard virtually from the start, and applies the highest adherence level. In its latest report, it should be noted that Consum applies the GRI G4 Guide and the highest adherence level, which indicates strong commitment with transparency and disclosure quality. Nowadays, the latest CSR report covers all the completeness GRI G4 guide requirements.

Regarding the cooperative's reporting on CSR, Consum issues its CSR Report since 2006. The next table shows the historical evolution of its CSR reporting:

Table 1. Consum CSR reporting

Report	Publication Year	Report type	Adherence level	Status	Integrated
2006	2007	GRI-G3	B	Self-declared	Not applicable
2007	2008	GRI-G3	A	Self-declared	Not applicable
2008	2009	GRI-G3	A	Self-declared	No
2009	2010	GRI-G3	A+	Third-party-checked	No
2010	2011	GRI-G3	A+	Third-party-checked	No
2011	2012	GRI-G3	A+	Third-party-checked	No
2012	2013	GRI-G3	A+	Third-party-checked	No
2013	2014	GRI-G3.1	A+	Third-party-checked	No
2014	2015	GRI-G4	In accordance - comprehensive	Not applicable	No

The cooperative has assured its CSR report since 2009. Table 2 shows the evolution of its Assurance Statements:

Table 2. Cooperative activity on Assurance Statements

Report	Publication Year	Assurance	Type of assuror	Assuror	Level of assurance	Assurance standard
2006	2007	No				
2007	2008	No				
2008	2009	No				
2009	2010	Yes	Non-accountant	Applus	n.a	n.a.
2010	2011	Yes	Non-accountant	Applus	Not specified	Not specified
2011	2012	Yes	Non-accountant	Applus	Not specified	Not specified
2012	2013	Yes	Non-accountant	Applus	Not specified	Not specified
2013	2014	Yes	Non-accountant	Applus	Not specified	Not specified
2014	2015	Yes	Non-accountant	Applus	Limited	ISO 19011

The independent assurance of the cooperative's CSR report was developed in accordance with ISO-19011 and following the G4 principles of the GRI Sustainability Reporting Guidelines.

Assurance comprised a combination of pre-assurance research, interviews and record reviews. In order to accomplish its opinion, the assuror performed a range of procedures, which included interviews with management, analytical procedures, examining documents and reporting systems, as well as selecting date testing. On the basis of performed assurance work, the assuror was satisfied with the information and the data contained in the CSR Report. This was in accordance with the GRI's G4 Guidelines, and -in its opinion- the report was accurate and reliable.

3.2. Research approach

Case studies are widely used in business analysis and it is increasingly being used as a rigorous research strategy (Hartley, 2004). According to Yin (1994), case studies are empirical research works that examine contemporary phenomena in their real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomena and their contexts are not clearly evident. Stake (2000) also affirmed that case studies have become one of the most common ways to do qualitative research. Thus, multiple sources of evidence (interviews, surveys and documentation) were used, as were triangulating empirical materials, to study the phenomenon of CSR reports assurance by a case study research strategy. Accordingly, this study explores the motivations, benefits and barriers of adopting assurance in a cooperative.

On the other hand, content analysis is a research technique for making valid inferences from data to their context, with the aim of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action (Krippendorff, 1980). Thus, content analysis is a systematic and rule-guided technique used to analyze the contents of textual data (Mayring, 2000). Content analysis can be quantitative

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or qualitative, and the last one can be used in either an inductive or a deductive way. All of the content analysis approaches sharing the systematic categorization of textual data in order to make sense of it (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Particularly, in qualitative content analysis, data are classified using categories that are created inductively (obtained from the data), and frequently applied to the data through close reading (Morgan, 1993).

Inductive and deductive content analysis processes involve three stages: preparation, organisation, and reporting of results (Elo et al, 2014). The preparation stage consists of collecting appropriate data for content analysis, making sense of the data, and selecting the unit of analysis. The organisation stage includes in the inductive way open coding, creating categories and abstraction (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Finally, the reporting stage describe the results by means of the content of the categories.

Both qualitative research methods are especially compatible, the case study as a research strategy and the qualitative content analysis as a method of examination of data material (Kohlbacher, 2006). This was the research approach of this investigation.

We aimed to determine the quality of assurance statements by coding the rules of Perego and Kolk's (2012) content analysis, based on the evaluative framework provided by O'Dwyer and Owen (2005). We included 23 items. The possible range of scores obtained from the content analysis was 0 to 31 (where 0 represents the lowest quality level and 31 the highest quality level). In order to ensure reliability in the content analysis, we followed Neuendorf's guidelines (2002). The coding procedure involved a team of two coders formed by the authors of the paper. The level of agreement between the coders was 100% for all the items.

Finally, a survey was conducted by collecting data from two of Consum's stakeholders (providers and social entities). We obtained their perceptions of the relevance of CSR reporting and assurance statements. In addition to the survey, several in-depth interviews were conducted with the agents directly involved with the assurance process. Relevant Consum corporate information was also considered to complement the necessary data to conduct our analysis.

3.3. Data collection

Corporate reports and website were analysed through a qualitative content analysis. Using keywords and quotations we developed a semantical categorisation and an inferential analysis for it.

Interviews were conducted by selecting people with responsibilities in preparing CSR reports and assurance statements. Semi-structured interviews were given according to a protocol that comprised three sections: (i) the cooperative's CSR policy; (ii) the assurance process; (iii) the motivations and benefits of the assurance process.

A questionnaire, partly devised from the interview results, was sent to all Consum's stakeholders. However, the available results are relevant only for two stakeholders, 'providers' and 'entities', because of the few answers at the time the study was done.

Table 1 shows the technical data sheet of the empirical study, which summarises the most relevant methodological aspects.

Table 3. Technical data sheet of the empirical study

Purpose of the study	To analyse the motivations and barriers for undertaking external assurance on the CSR report.
Research strategy	Case study.
Study population	Consum, SCV.
Data analysis methods	Content analysis of CSR Reports, Website and Assurance Statements.
	In-depth semi-structured interviews with the people responsible for preparing CSR report and assurors. Questionnaire sent to stakeholders.
Field work	April-September 2015.

This research approach is mainly descriptive. We assessed the extent to which the environment, the market, the cooperative ideology or the different management resources contributed positively or negatively to adopt the external assurance of the CSR report. The most important level in our inquiry was, however, the cooperative since its structure, history, dynamics and policies are the key sources that inform our assessment.

4.- Results

4.1. Preparation stage

This stage aims to obtain 'reliable results' through systematic and repeatable procedures. The first step into the stage is the *creation of the Corpus* under the principles of exhaustiveness, representability, homogeneity and suitability. We analysed all public corporate materials regarding company's cultures and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). As a result of the iterative research process, the elements of the corpus for this research are:

- Company's Website (sections about history, mission and values, org chart and CSR)
- Sustainability Reports from 2006 to 2014
- Assurance Statements from 2009 to 2014

- Interviews with the person in charge of the CSR Policy in the cooperative, and with the person who assured all the company's Sustainability Reports

Documentary analysis shows that Consum indicates working continuously to meet all its social responsibility requirements. Thus its social responsibility policy pursues offering consistent performances in all its processes and in the evaluation of the results.

The second step of the preparation step was the *formulation of hypothesis*. Our purpose is to identify motivations and barriers to adopt assurance in one cooperative. As a result of the iterative research process, we formulated the following set of research questions:

- What are the motivations and benefits for cooperatives during the assurance process? It is true that the cooperative ideology is determinant to assure the sustainability report? It is true that reputation is the most important benefit?
- What are the main barriers? It is true that the administration costs (time, money, etc.) are the main barriers to develop an assurance process?
- Are there any impacts on the quality of the assurance process?

The last step is the *identification of the analysis units*. An analysis unit is an element of the discourse with meaning and interest according our research goals. We used analysis units like 'words' ('reputation', 'values', 'ethics' 'responsibility' or 'sustainability') and 'quotations' (to define which the company's sources of authority are).

4.2. Organisation stage

The first step within this stage was the *consolidation of data*. Thus, we built the **Categorisation** in order to make the analysis easier, classifying the elements into groups according their common attributes (using previously-defined criteria and reducing the data).

Thus, to define the research setting, we consolidated general information from the corporate web page. This categorisation was semantical and it was made through keywords like 'history', 'strategy', 'values' and 'organisation' on Google.com (only on the website www.consum.es).

Secondly, we consolidated CSR information from the all Sustainability Reports (from 2006 to 2014). This categorisation also was semantical and it was made through keywords like 'Guidelines', 'standard', 'level', 'checked' and 'integrated'. Thus, we typified the main features of the cooperative's CSR reporting.

In the same sense, we consolidated all the assurance information from the Assurance Statements from 2009 to 2014. This categorisation also was semantical and it was made through keywords like 'assurance', 'level' and 'standard'. Thus, we characterised the main features of the CSR assurance of the coop-

erative. At the follow figure, we show two examples for the categories 'guideline' and 'level' (from the CSR Report) and for the categories ''standard' and 'level' (from the Assurance Statements 2014).

Figure 3. Example of the CSR Report and AS categorisation

The approach used has been mixed, where the analytical categories were predetermined but leaving the door open for new ones. Our main interest was diagnosing why the cooperatives firms to assure their Sustainability Reports. Thus, their expectations in the assurance process could fall into three categories: motivations (inputs; like 'motivation', 'reason'), benefits (outputs; like 'benefit', 'profit', 'earnings') and barriers within the process (with words like 'barrier', 'problem' or 'difficulty'). Inside the iterative research process, the keywords to identify the categories have been broaden to represent them better. The final list can be checked below.

Table 4. Categorisation and keywords used

Categories	Motivations	Barriers	Benefits
Keywords to identify categories	• 'Motivation' • 'Reason' • 'Values' • 'Commitment' • 'Transparency' • 'Proximity'	• 'Barrier' • 'Difficulty' • 'Problem'	• 'Improvement' • 'Benefit' • 'Earnings'

The transcription of the two qualitative interviews followed the same categorization: motivations, benefits and barriers within the process, using the same broaden keywords to identify the categories to represent them. In addition, we looked for keywords in relation to the categorisation made about the CSR Report and the Assurance Statements ('guideline', 'standard', 'level', etc.).

At last, we also analysed the Assurance Statements to check if the cooperative's characteristics affect the quality of the result. The categorisation has been developed according to the criteria presented by Perego and Kolk (2012), specifically made for measuring the assurance statements quality (see Appendix 1).

The second step within the organisation stage was the **_Inferential Analysis_** from an examination of the evidences. In our research, we made some inferences from a mixed approach. On the one hand, we tried to answer who wrote about sustainability assurance and which have been their goals, and -on the other hand- we also shed light about the effects of what was written about sustainability assurance.

Our main concerns were based on how to know the 'truth' beyond the 'social desirability' in the public discourse of the company. In this sense, the qualitative interviews (due to their openness and interaction) have been more useful to identify the latent content of the company's practices.

Consum has disclosed CSR reports since 2006, when only 20 Spanish companies and five cooperatives around the world disclosed CSR reports. In addition, Consum has always used the latest GRI standard available, and it applies the highest level of reporting in its CSR Report. As a consequence, Consum shows a strong commitment with transparency and disclosure quality. Nowadays, the latest CSR report covers all the completeness GRI G4 guide requirements.

About the Consum CSR report, as we can see in Table 5, its stakeholders' assessment is excellent (4.61/5.00). Indeed, there are no significant differences between providers and social entities, and the scores in social entities were not even slightly higher. Thus at the top we underline the scores of social economy entities (5.00) or service companies (5.00). The lowest score went to store maintenance providers (4.53), although it was a very high evaluation.

Table 5. Stakeholders' assessment of Consum's CSR reporting

Stakeholders	Surveys	How do you value the CSR report issued by Consum? (Likert Scale 1-5)
PROVIDERS	**126**	**4.58**
Food and Non-food	56	4.58
Fresh products	21	4.62
Transport services	4	4.75
Management control services	4	4.75
Stores maintenance	38	4.53
Not specified	3	—-
SOCIAL ENTITIES	**36**	**4.72**
Social Economy Entities	3	5.00
Research and Educational entities	5	4.80
Service companies	2	5.00
Media	5	4.60
NGO	18	4.61
Not specified	3	—-

On the other hand, through the documentary analysis we can see how the cooperative states that the report's external assurance arises from its conviction that communicating transparently will help Consum grow sustainably. Thus, the Cooperative Board approved the appointment of an external and independent assuror (Applus), who verified the text and data in the CSR report. Consum has assured its CSR report since 2009, which also denotes long-standing commitment to provide its report with the best credibility.

In this sense, table 6 shows that the evaluation of Consum's Assurance Statements was even better than the CSR reporting evaluation (4.66/5.00). No significant difference was found between both evaluations, but the assurance evaluation was higher. Once again, the evaluation of 'social entities' (4.72) was slightly higher than 'providers' (4.64), even if the results were mixed. Thus we highlight the scores of 'social economy entities' (5.00), 'Service companies' (5.00) or 'Management control services' (5.00). The lowest scores went to social entities: 'Research and Educational entities' (4.40) and 'Media' (4.40) (with high evaluations).

Table 6. Stakeholders' assessment of Consum's Assurance Statements

Stakeholders	Surveys	How do you value the external assurance of the Consum CSR report? (Likert Scale 1-5)
PROVIDERS	**126**	**4.64**
Food and Non-food	56	4.64
Fresh products	21	4.71
Transport services	4	4.75
Management control services	4	5.00
Stores maintenance	38	4.55
Not specified	3	—-
SOCIAL ENTITIES	**36**	**4.72**
Social Economy Entities	3	5.00
Research and Educational entities	5	4.40
Service companies	2	5.00
Media	5	4.40
NGO	18	4.67
Not specified	3	—-

About the motivations to assure its CSR Report, the inferential analysis of data collected in this report shows that the main motivation lies in its strong cooperative ideology. The search made on motivations in the CSR Reports through keywords has produced the next results:

Table 7. Results on motivations in the CSR Report 2014

Keywords	Times
Cooperation / Cooperative	63
Values	11
Commitment	8
Proximity	5
Transparency	4
Empathy	2
Honesty	2
Thoroughness	1
Solidarity	1
Responsibility	1
Satisfaction	1

In fact, the contents structure of its CSR Reports is based on their values (responsibility, proximity, commitment, satisfaction, implication, solidarity and clarity). So, its CSR Report show a lot of references to corporate attitudes like Cooperation/Cooperative (63), values (11), commitment (8), proximity (5) or transparency (4). These seem to point out to the motivations of the company: their corporate values. Thus, to issue a CSR report helps corporate strategy and improves relations with the company's stakeholders.

Regarding the benefits obtained, the inferential analysis has been based on the search about benefits in the CSR Reports (through the keywords cited before). The results are listed as follows:

Table 8. Results on 'benefits' in the CSR Report 2014

Keywords	Times
Improvement in the product quality (design, safety...)	5
Improvement in the services for clients	5
Reduction of the environmental impacts	5
Increasing Personal Motivation and encouraging Personnel's Career	4
Improvement in the suppliers' management (satisfaction, etc.).	2
Increasing the number of clients	1
Increasing sales	1
Social sustainability	1
Improvement in the facilities	1
Improvement in the positioning	1
Improvement in the Gender Equality	1

The results note the progresses on product quality (5) and clients' services quality (5) and the reduction of the environmental impacts (5) as the main benefits from the assurance processes for the cooperative. The improvement of the human resources management (4) is another relevant benefit of these practices.

We also identified the main barriers to be crossed to prepare CSR reports. The search made on barriers in the CSR Reports has generated the next result:

Table 9. Results on 'barriers' in the CSR Report 2014

Keywords	Times
To assure the chain value completely	1

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As a consequence, it seems clear that CSR Report is not guided to identify the problems or barriers happened during the adoption of the assurance process. Only once has been possible to note one problem (to assure the chain value completely), although the CSR Report pointed out that the role of the cooperative inside the chain value is very important. This is a clear field of improvement in the CSR reporting of the cooperative.

About the *consolidation of the data* from the qualitative interviews, the inferential analysis show that -bearing in mind the documentary analysis and the interviews held with the people responsible for CSR- the cooperative's main motivation lies in its ideology. Thus its social responsibility involves transparency, and disclosing a CSR report is a way of achieving this. In this sense, and from a management perspective, preparing a CSR report helps corporate strategy and improves relations with stakeholders.

Regarding the benefits obtained, the CSR report assuror (Applus) highlights the stakeholders' involvement in both the reporting and assurance processes. In fact, it is one of the cooperative's singularities that assurors recognise (compared to what happens in other companies). Consequently, its estimates that the CSR report achieves good credibility among stakeholders.

Moreover, we identified by means of the interviews the main barriers to be crossed to prepare CSR reports. In the experts' opinion, CSR reporting is unknown in the business community. GRI requirements for preparing CSR reports are very demanding for SMEs because they require many organisational resources (especially the application of G4 guidelines). The beginning of CSR reporting in the cooperative was hard because managerial and software problems arose. As the CSR reports, introducing CSR practices implies relevant costs in time, people and investments (the adaptation period in the cooperative to follow GRI's G4 guidelines was 18 months). In short, it is not simple to achieve extensive communication with all stakeholders, but issuing a CSR report makes this easier.

As we stated before, the major motivation of assuring the cooperative's CSR report lies in its ideology and values (transparency, honesty, reliability). In times of crisis, the assurance statement is a path to help recover stakeholders' trust. Moreover in competitive advantages terms, assurance statements can be a way of gaining corporate reputation. However, according to the experts and corporate documents, to gain reputation does not seem that important in the cooperative.

Regarding the benefits achieved, the assuror underlined the improved stakeholders' engagement because this enhances the materiality analysis and the decision-making process. As a result, the assurance statements offered more reliability among stakeholders.

By means of in-depth interviews, we identified the main barriers to be crossed to prepare CSR reports. In the experts' opinion, CSR reporting is unknown in the business community. GRI requirements for preparing CSR reports are very demanding for SMEs because they require many organisational resources (especially the application of G4 guidelines). The beginning of CSR reporting in Consum was hard because managerial and software problems arose. As the CSR reports, introducing CSR

practices implies relevant costs in time, people and investments (the adaptation period in Consum to follow GRI's G4 guidelines was 18 months). In short, it is not simple to achieve extensive communication with all stakeholders, but issuing a CSR report makes this easier. Finally, it is important to note that -according to the experts- assurance statement standards are not easy for stakeholders to understand, and assurance costs can prove to be a significant barrier (even if the cost is modest, between 5,000 and 10,000 euros per year in this case).

At last, we analysed the Assurance Statements to check if the cooperative's characteristics affect the quality of the result. The results show how the choice of a consultant assuror involves adopting a quality management approach based on Standard ISO-19011. This perspective is considered useful in the cooperative, mainly because internal reports add value to its CSR policy. However, regarding the contents and structure of the issued assurance statements, it is possible to assess the quality of each report. According to Perego and Kolk (2012), Table 10 summarises the results of the content analysis on the last six assurance statements of the cooperative.

Table 10. Assurance Statements quality assessment

Report	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Publication Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Title	n.a.	1	1	1	1	1
Addressee	n.a.	0	0	0	0	0
Name of assuror	n.a.	1	1	1	1	1
Location of assuror	n.a.	1	1	1	1	0
Report date	n.a.	1	1	1	1	1
Responsibilities of reporter	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Responsibilities of assuror	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Independence of assuror from reporting organization	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Impartiality of assuror towards stakeholders	n.a.	0	0	0	0	0
Scope of the assurance engagement	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Level of assurance	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Competences of assuror	n.a.	0	0	0	0	0
Criteria used to asses evidence and reach conclusion	n.a.	2	2	2	2	2
Assurance standard used	n.a.	0	0	0	0	2
Summary of work performed	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Materiality (from a stakeholder perspective)	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Extent of stakeholder participation in assurance process (inclusivity)	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
Responsiveness to stakeholders	n.a.	0	0	0	0	0
Completeness	n.a.	0	0	0	0	1
No Limitations to the Scope	n.a.	0	0	0	0	0
General conclusion/opinion	n.a.	1	1	1	1	2
Recommendations / Opportunities for improvement	n.a.	0	0	0	0	0
Quality of the AS = $(\Sigma_{(i=1-23)} Ci)$	**n.a.**	**7**	**7**	**7**	**7**	**18**

Generally speaking, the quality of the cooperative's assurance statements is low because the report does not disclose the most potential contents of an assurance statement. Nevertheless, the last application of the GRI G4 Guidelines meant an increase in content requirements, consequently quality was greatly enhanced.

5.- Discussion

Consum seems a successful case as a pioneer in CSR reporting and assurance statements. It is worth mentioning that Consum is one of the five cooperatives worldwide in the GRI database with assurance in its CSR reporting. Despite the crisis, Consum's commitment with its CSR policy goes ahead with better and more sophisticated CSR reporting and provides higher quality assurance statements.

In line with Spence and Gray (2007), Consum CSR reporting is a way of ensuring its legitimacy, and is also a tool to manage stakeholder relationships. Consum is a pioneer in CSR policies among Spanish companies, and also among cooperatives around the world, and it shows truly strategic CSR commitment. Hence this CSR policy does not seem o be a process to build only good impressions, and its practices do not appear to be a subject 'captured' for managerial interests.

In this case study, CSR seems an integral part of Consum's values, constitutes a part of its cooperative ideology and is a way of generating value for its stakeholders. In this sense, the voluntary adoption of assurance in CSR reporting can be explained by Consum's willingness to improve credibility and transparency.

In addition, the assurance process is considered useful in the cooperative, mainly because CSR reports and the assuror activities add value to its policies and business processes (in line with O'Dwyer and Owen, 2005). In fact, Consum attributes to its CSR policy the increase in its productivity (10% since 2007), and also the decline in the employees' absenteeism (38% since 2007). In the end, for the cooperative, the assurance process seems a way to generate value for its stakeholders

The assurance process provided by the assuror seems comprehensive and robust, and satisfies the needs of both management and other stakeholders. The assuror's approach follows the newest standard (GRI G4) and has the highest level (in accordance). It shows high commitment with CSR assurance.

Consum is a large company that belongs to a stakeholder-oriented country and the Spanish market is dominated by Big-4 audit firms. However, this company has not chosen an accountant as an

assurance provider. Consum gives the impression that the reputation of Big-4 audit firms is not relevant in this choice. In fact, in line with O'Dwyer and Owen (2005), Consum declares that other consultants, such as Applus, create more value for the company.

In general, stakeholder engagement in the assurance process is lacking. However, in Consum, we can recognize relevant stakeholder engagement through interviews and corporate documents.

The main improvement proposal lies in the quality assurance area. Thus broadening the contents of the assurance statements would be a way to improve their quality (for example, defining the assuror's competences, its impartiality, limitations of scope or recommendations). Perhaps the combined use of AA-1000-AS with ISO-19011 could help improve assurance quality.

This study also has its limitations. The approach is qualitative and mainly descriptive. Therefore, the characteristics of a single case-study, such as that about Consum, are not comparable with the population as a whole. However, the research conducted in a real-life context adds value to the current literature on assurance in cooperatives.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix: Categorisation and keywords used

Categories		Scale (total 31 points)
Title	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Addressee	0	No reference
	1	Addressee is internal or "the readers"
	2	Stakeholder mentioned in the addressee
Name of assuror	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Location of assuror	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Report date	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Responsibilities of reporter	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Responsibilities of assuror	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Independence of assuror from reporting organization	0	No reference
	1	Reference or mere statement expressing that independence can be looked up on the internet
Impartiality of assuror towards stakeholders	0	No reference
	1	Reference (a remark that such a declaration can be made available on request or reference to an internet site already qualifies for a 1)
Competences of assuror	0	No reference
	1	Statement claiming competency (but no explanatory note) or mere reference to an internet site
	2	Explanatory statement of competencies based on prior experience / engagements
Scope of the assurance engagement	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Summary of work performed	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Criteria used to asses evidence and reach conclusion	0	No reference
	1	Reference to publicly unavailable criteria
	2	Reference to publicly available criteria (e.g., internally developed criteria that are published anywhere in the report or GRI)
Assurance standard used	0	No reference
	1	Reference to publicly unavailable criteria
	2	Reference to publicly available criteria

Level of assurance	0	Not applicable or no reference to level of assurance
	1	All issues under the assurance scope have been assured to a limited or moderate level
	2	Selected issues under the assurance scope were assured to a reasonable or high level, and others only to a limited or moderate level
	3	All issues under the assurance scope were assured to a reasonable or a high level
Materiality (from a stakeholder perspective)	0	No reference
	1	Reference limited to a broad statement (e.g. "covers all material aspects" or "…in all material respects…") but also negative statements claiming that assuror has not undertaken any work to confirm that all relevant/ material issues are included
	2	Reference and explanation of materiality setting or reference limited to a broad statement and stakeholder perspective introduced (e.g. "issues material to stakeholders have been considered")
	3	Reference, explanation of materiality setting and stakeholder perspective introduced
Extent of stakeholder participation in the assurance process (INCLUSIVITY)	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Completeness	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Responsiveness to stakeholders	0	No reference
	1	Reference
Limitations to the Scope	0	No reference
	1	Reference
General conclusion/opinion	0	No reference
	1	Mere statement expressing the opinion of the assuror (e.g., "XY's report is a fair presentation of XY's CSR performance"). A 1 is assigned only if the conclusion consists only of one sentence
	2	Explanatory statement (more than one sentence, but recommendations for improvement are not considered part of the conclusion)
Recommendations / Opportunities for improvement	0	Statement not includes observations/recommendations
	1	Statement includes observations/recommendations

SOURCE: Adapted from Perego and Kolk (2012).