

Contribution of NGOs to the Reputation of Companies. the Example of the Togolese Consumers Association (A.T.C.)

Penn Laré Batouth¹

Abstract

From a perspective of the sociology of organizations, the main objective of this research is to determine to what extent advocacy NGOs really have power over corporate reputations. Thus, like the work carried out in economic sociology and organizational science, this research examines the societal role of NGOs (lobbying, social network, trust) in the reputation of companies. The methodology adopted is based on documentary research and semi-structured interviews conducted with some members of the Togolese Consumers Association (ATC) and representatives of large companies in Togo. The results obtained show that if advocacy NGOs are not the only groups engaged in lobbying on companies, the types and practices of communication that they put in place in order to change social and environmental behavior make them a very influential actor.

Keywords: actors, lobbying by NGOs, corporate reputation, social responsibility.

1. Introduction

Research on corporate reputation is a field very much investigated in sociology of organizations, economic sociology, political sociology, digital and Internet sociology, etc. It is not yet sufficiently organized into a thematic section, and, to date, it does neither constitute a principle of organized knowledge nor a principle of structured institution (Chauvin 2013). In sociology, reputation is considered in light of two trends: on the one hand, as a source of deficient information (Whitmeyer 2000; Ferris & al. 2003) which facilitates activities such as consumption and employment, and on the other hand, as a social construct that is typical of our society which constitutes a control mechanism. Corporate reputation emerges as a dominant collective agreement built on what the person knows (Camic 1992).

In the context of an American sociology marked by “reputational” approaches to political power, Polsby (1963, 51) invited, for example in the 1960s, to favor the study of behaviors rather than that of secondary representations: “Questioning oneself about reputations amounts to questioning, in return, about behaviors. Arguably, the researcher should be concerned with studying behaviors directly rather than relying on opinions from second-hand sources.” Despite these reservations, the notion of reputation begins to be integrated into the vocabulary of organizations (Boistel 2014). This is a notion that makes sense for socio-economic actors who use it for social evaluations that lead to simple categorizations, being integrated into a symbolic space made up of binary oppositions, of which the dichotomy “good” / “bad” reputation is a good illustration. The social force of this dichotomy rests first of all on the fact that it is commonly mobilized in daily life and that it therefore generally makes sense for social actors.

Reputation has a fundamental role in the management of the company (Anani-Bossman 2020). The activity and survival of a company today depend largely on its reputation, be it economic, financial, ethical, social or environmental (Boistel 2008). This new situation has made the company a new place of power in society (Juffé 1996) and a new major player in public affairs (Pirard 2010). Thus, companies try to promote their actions and improve their reputation with their audiences and consumers by claiming the notions of transparency, proximity, good governance, ethics and responsibility.

Outraged by the silence surrounding the real practices of companies, new actors have gradually decided to control on their own initiative the actions and speeches of companies.

These are what Drullion (2004) called the “reputation watchdogs”².

¹Department of Sociology, University of Lomé (TOGO), 22 P.O. Box 200 Lomé 22, Tel. 00228 90 01 30 90 e-mail: ibatouth@gmail.com

The term “watchdog” evokes these tireless watchers on the lookout for the imminent arrival of a danger in order to allow the organization to respond to it. Among these “sentinels” are the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Although no universal definition of an NGO exists (Perroulaz 2004), it is often considered that they are groups of citizens coming together into associations that fight for a humanistic cause. We can distinguish two types of NGOs: humanitarian NGOs which help in development or which specialize in emergency aid (Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, etc.) and advocacy NGOs whose objective is to fight for or defend an opinion, a group of people, or a cause, such as Greenpeace, Oxfam, Reporters Without Borders, etc. Advocacy NGOs play a critical role in the process of monitoring and verifying the actions of companies, having acquired significant power since the 1980s by becoming increasingly professional and influential (Mach 2002). Advocacy NGOs have in fact followed the relative inversion of power between States and Multinationals: while they mainly attacked the former in the 1970s and 1980s, they are now challenging the malicious actions of the latter.

In Togo, the activities of national NGOs did not really gain momentum until 1985 (Gogu e 1991; Assogba 1991). Those which have braced themselves against the iniquitous practices of companies are rare or they are gradually being suppressed for lack of resources. But, in recent years, human rights NGOs and especially consumer rights organizations are experiencing an upturn in their activities with large Togolese companies, whether public or private. This convergence is primarily due to sustainable development policies and Corporate Social and environmental Responsibility (CSR).

This research is based on the activities of the Togolese Consumers Association (ATC), an advocacy and consumer rights defense organization. Established in 1999 with the aim of promoting the interests of consumers and making their rights known, ATC monitors the quality of services offered by businesses and ensures that they respect their social and environmental responsibility. ATC monitors unfair practices and uses legal action when necessary. The choice of ATC is therefore supported by the fact that this organization is one of the few entities or institutions which really deal with the phenomenon studied in Togo, by leading actions with companies in favor of quality of life, the cessation of trading activities, or by fighting against plastic pollution, trafficking in fake drugs, etc.

The research focuses on the direct relationships between ATC and companies, about their reputation in Togo. It aims to determine the extent to which this organization really has an influence over the reputation of companies and to try to identify the various effects. More specifically, it is about:

- understanding, from the example of ATC, the functions that advocacy and consumer rights NGOs perform vis-à-vis companies;
- examining the systems and strategies used by ATC to have influence on companies.

This research revolves around the theoretical considerations and the methodological approach, the presentation and analysis of the data collected as well as the discussion of the results.

2. Theoretical considerations and methodological approach

2.1. Context and problematic of the study

While relations between NGOs and companies were either non-existent or marked by deep opposition (Binninger & Robert 2007), the current conciliations or co-operations observed between these two actors now demonstrate the emergence of a profound change in behaviors. Indeed, being enthusiastic about communication that gives them high visibility among their target audiences and the general public, companies seek to build a solid reputation, while persuading shareholders of their profitability, the public opinion of their legitimacy, and NGOs of their morality (Buisson 2005). In doing so, they constantly expose themselves, which is their strength, but also their weakness. As a matter of fact, by using communication on a large scale, companies are increasingly confronted with the ethical demands of the civil society, and more particularly of the human rights advocacy and defense NGOs.

However, since the Biafra crisis, NGOs have acquired the capacity to make their voices heard (Gorin 2013). Their networking allows the most influential ones to spread the ideas of those with lower visibility. For the past fifteen years, these NGOs have been making awareness campaigns and mobilizing public opinion in order to denounce the practices of companies whose behavior is not appreciated.

²Kristine Drullion defended her Master’s thesis in Communication for Companies and Institutions at CELSA in 2004 under the title: “Are NGOs ‘the watchdogs’ of the reputation of companies?”

For a long time NGOs and companies were actors which ignored each other, because there was mutual mistrust between them (Mach 2002). The company, unfamiliar to NGO's field action, observed this actor dubiously and considered it unprofessional. This judgment is only changing little by little and only recently. This mistrust is not one-sided. NGOs have often had a very negative view of how businesses operate (Renaud & Berland 2007), because companies' ultimate goal is to make a profit, and sometimes at any cost. Thus, for lack of understanding, and because of their seemingly very far-flung cultures, NGOs and companies were initially actors who resented each other. However, certain dynamics are common to these two actors: the NGO has no shareholders and does not seek to make a profit, of course, but it engages in donor retention and is constantly looking for new funding, which leads the NGO to resort to business techniques of marketing.

The increased credibility of NGOs and the recognition of their action in public opinion have given them a much greater power of contestation than twenty years ago. Fortified by this new power, NGOs have somewhat abandoned their criticism of States and have begun to openly criticize the actions of certain companies, especially Multinationals. This is, for example, the case today of the campaign of "constructive harassment" entitled: "Let's keep our eyes open" by the International Federation for Human Rights (IFHR) against Western companies' investments in China, a country where human rights are regularly violated.

Initially, failing to perceive the striking power of these sentinels, companies did not know how to react to their attacks and walled themselves into a silence that was not understood by public opinion. This was particularly the case with Nestlé during the "Milk Affair" in 1977 when associations such as Baby Milk criticized the company for sending powdered milk to regions where it was impossible to use it properly for lack of clean drinking water (Guilbaud 2017). Milk contaminated in this way had resulted in the death of infants causing an unprecedented scandal orchestrated by NGOs (children's health is a very rallying theme), a scandal that is likely to resurface even today in times of crisis.

As the power of these actors to voice concerns was finally taken seriously, a period of power struggle began. Faced with emotional communication (Sifaoui & Rouquette 2017) from NGOs, companies have gradually implemented effective countermeasures through preventive or crisis communication. Indeed, it can be noted that many cases of lobbying activities lead then to the prospect for a partnership. Thus, by lobbying companies, NGOs are also anticipating a successful outcome of co-operation that will result in an opportunity to push for their claims. Lobbying is therefore often a means of achieving collaboration.

The activist communication of the majority of advocacy NGOs, relayed by the media (including the Internet) which provide a platform to echo the messages, has the capacity to mobilize opinion and other activist actors. This can generate crises, with immediate and sometimes lasting effects, which lead public opinion to position itself as a judge and the NGO to generate standards of conduct. The company must manage this period skillfully to avoid jeopardizing its reputation, its turnover, or even its operations. The crisis is therefore a critical moment when upholding the reputation is more important than ever and where several communication logics are implemented (that of NGOs, that of the media and that of the denounced company) in order to be pragmatically rooted in sustainable development and social responsibility. NGOs can therefore offer the company the opportunity to promote its social and environmental reputation to the public opinion, while contributing effectively to a "great cause".

Building ethics, engaging in sustainable development and consolidating corporate social responsibility sometimes seem to be Sisyphean tasks in the face of the demanding expectations of NGOs. However, this seems to be essential today if the company is to maintain its reputation in the context of a globalized economy. Beyond the crisis, the confrontation and collaboration between NGOs and companies seem to have become a new pattern of relationship that will endure. The company therefore has much to gain by adapting to it.

In Togo, the relative powerlessness of public actors to tackle the environmental issue and the growing problem of industrial waste have led certain NGOs and development associations to be concerned about environmental challenges: pollution of the ocean by extractive industries (Société nouvelle des phosphates du Togo, cement factories) and the air pollution (oil companies, transport companies, etc.). At first glance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives within Togolese companies seem to be limited to subsidiaries of multinationals (CIMTOGO, WACEM, Total, Bolloré Group) which transpose CSR policies often decided at the level of the headquarters in the West, but in reality, although they are not formalized, CSR practices are very present, especially within SMEs (Small and medium-sized enterprises) which constitute the vast majority of the local economic fabric (Pigé & Bigou-Laré 2015).

The research problematic is therefore: how can an NGO advocating and defending consumer rights like ATC determine the reputation of large companies in Togo?

The working hypothesis is that in Togo, corporate reputation is determined in part by advocacy NGOs, because they have the endorsement of public opinion. From this working hypothesis flow the secondary hypotheses below:

- ATC, whose advocacy role has gained prominence in Togo, is a vector of the reputation of large Togolese companies in achieving their social responsibility mission;
- There are contingency factors that impact ATC's activities in its watchdog role.

2.2. Theoretical framework of reference

Understanding the relationship between ATC, an advocacy NGO, and large companies in Togo, in the perspective of the corporate reputation of these companies, requires the use of sociological theories of organizations. Several theoretical schools of thought place reputation at the heart of their development. These are, in particular, "stakeholder" theory, resource theory and business ethics.

2.2.1. Stakeholder theory and reputation

The Stakeholder theory highlights the need to take into account stakeholder requests in the analysis of company reputation. Freeman (1984) defines the stakeholder as an individual or group of individuals who can affect or be affected by the achievement of organizational goals. Pesqueux (2009) details the postulates that are essential today for this partnership vision of the company:

- several groups affect or are affected by managerial decisions;
- the nature of these relationships is studied in terms of process and results;
- "stakeholders" build a constellation of interests that are both cooperative and competitive; and
- no interest is supposed to dominate the interests of others.

The central question is then to define who are these stakeholders. While pragmatically, Hustedes (1998) recognizes the existence of four stakeholders (customers, employees, community and shareholders), the previous definition leads Donaldson and Preston (1995) to propose a larger list (customers, employees, investors, governments, lobby groups, suppliers, professional associations, local communities). This perception is not unanimous, however, since other authors prefer to specify the primary stakeholders, who have a contractual and formal relationship with the company (owners, employees, customers and suppliers), and secondary stakeholders such as consumers, the media, pressure groups, governments, competitors, the public and society (Carroll & Buchholtz 2000). For Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholders would recognize themselves by the fact that they possess at least one of the following three attributes: the power to influence organizational decisions, the degree of legitimacy in the relations with the company, the urgency of rights that they can claim to exercise on the company.

It is therefore understandable that the company cannot neglect its influential stakeholders, as is the case of ATC in Togo. There would be a social contract between the organization and the stakeholders, a contract made up of the acceptance of the values and expectations of society. The role of communication is therefore fundamental to show how the organization takes into account the values of stakeholders and to demonstrate that its practices are not contrary to these values. The consequences in this case can be strong and varied (boycott of consumers, higher taxation, decline of suppliers, of the capital market, etc.).

Company policy, marketing strategy and communication then form a triptych that shows the logical continuity between the three elements mentioned (Weil 1990). The search for coherence must exist at several levels: development strategy and communication strategy, speeches and achievements, visual identity and written messages, internal and external communication (Borja of Mozota 1997). Communication then has the function of revealing, assisting and contributing to the realization of the company's project.

2.2.2. Resource theory and reputation

This theory places competitive advantage at the heart of the business. The distinctive resources of organizations therefore constitute discriminating factors for sustainable competitive advantages as long as they are specific (Williamson 1990), complex (Nelson 1991) and not codifiable (Polanyi 1967). Penrose (1959) defines resources as anything that can be qualified as strength or weakness for a given firm. More formally, the resources of a firm at a given moment can be defined as the assets (tangible or intangible) which are almost permanently associated with the firm. The combination and coordination of these will transform resources into competencies. It is possible to classify resources into six categories (Torrès-Blay 2000): financial resources (self-financing capacity, debt ratio, cash volume, etc.), human resources (number of employees, level of qualification, experience, intelligence, etc.), physical resources (production sites and their geographical location, land, machines, stocks, etc.), organizational resources (information systems, ISO standards, procedures, coordination mechanisms, etc.),

technological resources (know-how, patents...), “reputation” resources (brands, notoriety, image, company reputation...).

Communication is therefore seen as a resource for building a competitive advantage. But, furthermore, it is necessary for the strategic intention which rests on the vision of the company. However, this vision implies membership in a business project.

2.2.3. Corporate ethics and reputation

This theory shows that ethical behavior makes an organization more successful. Responsibility is at the heart of questions about the role of organizations (Igalens&Joras 2002). It reflects the obligation to justify all acts according to societal standards. From the perspective of responsibility, ethics is seen as the counterpart of freedom posed as a principle of action. However, the issues of social and societal responsibility devolved on the company are not unanimous. Some believe that it is normal to elevate companies to the rank of institutions capable of providing meaning to society (Carré 1998); others denounce this new role (Faber 1992). However, by expressing its values, the company affirms its uniqueness and allows its members to draw a sense of belonging (Mercier 1998). Thus, the idea that company performance is not measured only in monetary terms has gradually gained ground (Toublan 1995). This approach has led to a vision of the organization that is economically efficient and at the same time socially responsible and civic.

This vision of corporate social responsibility has been represented by a diagram comprising three concentric circles: the first defines the broad economic responsibilities, from the production of goods and services to the maintenance of jobs; the second integrates social standards and values such as improving working conditions, respect for the environment, consumer information; the third places the company within its environment through its actions of patronage, fight against exclusion, etc. In order to make it possible to evaluate the actions of the company which fall within this logic, Clarkson (1995) proposes a list of responsibilities of the company by stakeholder: for the owners (respect for rights, communication, defense, overall policy, complaints); for employees (remuneration, employment, career, health, absenteeism, etc.); for consumers (overall policy, communication, product safety, complaints); for suppliers (general policy, relative power, etc.); for public authorities (health and environment, involvement in public policy); for competitors (general policy, etc.).

This very humanistic approach is not devoid of problems. Due to the multiplicity of stakeholders and the fact of their divergent expectations, the company will be confronted with contrary concerns that come from different groups (Posner and Schmidt, 1984) for which it will have difficulty positioning itself due to limited rationality which occurs in a situation of choice in a context of complexity. Indeed, one must integrate a plurality of protagonists with whom one must reckon (Padioleau, 1989, Lepissier, 1999). However, the theory of limited rationality shows that leaders will have difficulty making judicious choices in an environment that has become very complex.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach, through documentary analysis and interview technique. The literature research initially focused on reading the theoretical and empirical literature on company reputation. It consisted of a recent bibliographical research on the subject, which includes writings, supplemented by articles from the press and specialized journals. Several barometers were also studied, as well as internal company documents.

The documentary sources were then supplemented by data from the interviews. In total, 12 interviews of about 45 minutes each (2 open and 10 semi-structured) with members of the Association of Consumers of Togo (ATC) and representatives of large companies in Togo³ were conducted. The interviews were recorded and transcribed when the interlocutors gave their consent, and for the rest, notes were written down.

The data collected was processed using the content analysis technique of Bardin (2013). The data from the interviews (transcripts and notes) were the subject of several readings and a double analysis. First, a vertical analysis of each interview was done, then a horizontal inter-interview analysis. This double analysis made it possible to bring out relevant categories vis-à-vis the objective of the research.

A work of triangulation between the theoretical framework of the research, the categories resulting from the work of analyzing the data from the interviews and finally the secondary data that could be collected in the field (reports, presentation sheets, technical sheets, etc.) was realized.

³More specifically, 9 members of the ATC, made up of lawyers (2 lawyers, 1 private company lawyer and 1 public administration lawyer) and research lecturers (1 sociologist, 1 economist, 1 environmentalist, 1 manager) and 2 business representatives (Port Autonome de Lomé, Togocom Group).

The analytical approaches focused on the means of lobbying of ATC on state policies and company practices and the constraints of NGOs in their monitoring role.

4. Research results

4.1. ATC pressure: from public utility to manipulation

4.1.1. Effective and diversified pressure tactics

Since its creation in 1999, ATC has been campaigning against certain state policies and corporate practices. With NGO status, ATC has developed and strengthened its modes of action and exercises a monitoring and denunciation role by targeting or informally attacking state public action and non-socially responsible companies, that is, those companies which overlook their social and environmental responsibility. The themes that ATC advocates gain wide public attention and its ability to access and engage the media is unmistakable. As Beaudoin (2005, 187) asserts, "The acronym 'NGO' has become a label" which constitutes an important element of its credibility, and has a critical role in communication because it conveys a perception of ethics and implies values considered universal. By virtue of its NGO status, ATC carries the fears and demands that society no longer sees embodied in a political debate deemed "tasteless". Free to speak and act, being non-profit, "NGOs pose as the voice of opinion in the face of institutions," (Beaudoin 2005, 194) institutions which are often perceived as distant, cold and too monolithic.

Part of ATC's power to challenge companies is that they place the debate on politico-ideological ground on which corporations, large though they are, are not used to playing. By observing the evolution of ATC operating methods, the following underlying tendencies can be identified:

- occasional or lasting coalitions and groupings with other consumer rights defense organizations (Togo Consumers League, Togolese League for Human Rights, Martin Luther King Movement), to become more influential and skilled in the debate ;
- the integration of the political and legislative agenda coupled with the development of lobbying, in an attempt to change the "rules of the game" for lack of being able to directly influence the behavior of companies;
- the use of information as a new mode of action from the financial world such as shareholder activism, etc.

These tendencies converge: several modes of action are sometimes used at the same time on the same subject, in particular the protection of quality of life. They illustrate how ATC is evolving and influencing in a more significant way the economic life and the life of the Togolese society. Willingly or unwillingly, Togolese companies are gradually forced to assume a social role and take into account their impact on the quality of life, in particular their concerns for their reputation.

Often eluding stringent legal control, the company cannot elude its reputation. Since ATC is primarily concerned with the social and environmental reputation of companies, it becomes a subtle and effective form of control in this area. By threatening to attack the company for neglecting this aspect of its responsibility, they threaten the overall reputation of the company. According to the secretary of the ATC: "When public opinion is interested in the layoff plan at Togocom, or at the New cotton company of Togo, for example, it is all the brand image of these companies that is attacked and challenged. So the public in Togo has this strength to lower the reputation of unscrupulous economic operators and this is what gives us our strength". These remarks are also corroborated by a member of ATC who is a research lecturer of media sociology in these terms: "As in any demands of a political or social nature, the public constitutes in a way the keystone of the success of the actions. Any claim that does not have the approval of the people is doomed to fail. It is the people who give, it is they who also take back".

Disinterested, familiar with the field and the public, ATC is an important source of information available on the actions of national and multinational companies. This exclusivity gives it credit with the media, and the values that it defends earn it great trust from the youth, a very dynamic public in activism in Togo. ATC scrutinizes companies, and can trigger a crisis affecting their image or even their reputation, thanks to its privileged access to the media. Thus recently, it called on the Togolese to boycott petroleum products and telephone services to denounce the high costs of services and products. According to one of the ATC officials, the "truth of prices" of petroleum products is not respected when prices fall on the international market. She also denounces the "very high cost" of communication and electricity in Togo despite the "poor quality of services".

During the press conference with the media, ATC officials urged people not to use telephone and related services as well as petroleum products sold at gas stations for a day. As a result, telephone costs have been revised downwards.

It results from these data the permanent connectivity of consumer organizations with the public, thanks to which they in turn gain notoriety and credibility. To mobilize public opinion around its actions and demands, the NGOs, in this case ATC, uses as strategies the organization of training workshops, press conferences, round tables, focus days, awareness raising actions, radio and TV broadcasts, etc. At the same time, these strategies constitute means of pressure which they use to safeguard the interests of consumers.

4.1.2. Impact of ATC lobbying on business

The case of WACEM (West African Cement), an industrial company in the Free Zone, operating in cement, steel, transport, logistics and IT, raises many controversies. Raised from the ashes of the former company CIMAO (West African Cement), WACEM is owned by the Indians Prasad Motaparti Siva Rama Vara and ManubhaiJethabhai Patel. The explosion of a silo on the site had caused, on June 30, 2015, the death of five (5) local employees and an Indian, all workers who were working on the fuel tank of the cement factory installed in the town of Tabligbo.

Under pressure from several NGOs including ATC, the court of justice in Tabligbo, a mining town located 80 kilometers north-east of Lomé, delivered the verdict in the trial opposing the Wacem company to the families of the victims of this accident that occurred on the company's site. The court condemned the Indian group to pay a total of 280 million CFA francs to the families, and 2 million CFA francs to the State, which is a civil party in the case, for damages.

The populations, the local and national NGOs denounce the practices of the company in the area, particularly its environmental impact (pollution in particular) and its non-participation in the development of the locality (schools, health, environment, etc.). The company is poorly perceived in the prefecture and its image is at its lowest. The crisis was the moment when the reputation of the company was seriously challenged. This is all the more true as NGOs are no longer the only actors who put the company under pressure. The company can now also be sanctioned by new actors who do not engage in the same advocacy activities as that of NGOs, but are also effective. Here, it is the executives of the area, private media and social networks.

Overall, the legitimacy of WACEM's presence in Tabligbo is questioned by several local and national NGOs. On this issue emerges an ideological thought: corporate social responsibility (CSR). One of the most common definitions of social responsibility equates it with voluntary corporate initiatives of a social and environmental nature going beyond the obligations set by law (Gendron & al. 2004). The concept of social responsibility recognizes that the company has a life (and a responsibility) independent of the lives of its employees. These can be anti-pollution measures that go beyond regulatory requirements, proactive human resource management policies or investments in the community. These social responsibility practices embody the commitment of a high leadership willing to recognize the impact of the company on society and to assume social responsibilities in line with that impact.

The other case follows a complaint filed by ATC and other consumer organizations to the Postal and Electronic Communications Regulatory Authority (ARCEP)⁴. In February 2021, ARCEP imposed a fine of the amount of one billion nine million five hundred sixty-four thousand three hundred and twenty-five (1,009,564,325) F CFA on the company Togo Cellulaire (Togocom Group) for non-compliance with the prohibition on differentiation of On-net and Off-net tariffs stipulated in its specifications.

Beside the complaints before the courts, an economics research lecturer, member of the ATC, adds: "We are deploying actions of denunciations, demonstrations, boycotts, sit-ins, etc. But we must recognize that our means of pressure depend on the financial means at our disposal, but we are not discouraged".

ATC came into conflict with various Togolese companies, including the Brasserie du Benin for the quality and price of BB products; Togo Telecom, Togo Cellulaire, Moov-Togo for the quality of services and awaits the results of the audit for the discounts or debits of 5 Francs Tax incl. / min on each outgoing call made from February 5th to March 6th, 2013 for the purpose of supporting the National Football Team "Les Eperviers" in the African Cup of Nations in 2013 that ATC had requested several months ago;

Total (Public Limited) on the issue of gas cylinders that are refused at TOTAL gas stations and other domestic gas sale shops; and with the Electricity Energy Company of Togo (CEET) for invoices with index readings exceeding more than 30 days, thus increasing the costs in terms of electricity consumption brackets, etc.

⁴Arcep was created by law n° 2012-018 on electronic communications (LCE) of December 17, 2012 amended by law n° 2013-003 of February 19, 2019 to regulate the electronic communications and postal markets in a context of modernity and technological evolution.

With the exception of Brasserie BB and CEET, all the companies aforementioned have been sued in courts and the cases are still pending. A public administration lawyer, member of the ATC, when interviewed, commented on this fact in these terms: “It is a courageous act and a very first in our country that an association brings a complaint before the courts. But what is worrying in this case is whether ATC has got the means to carry this legal action through till the end against this economic machine which, besides, has the support of the government”.

NGOs in Togo do have leverage to influence the actions of companies that they consider unfair. These pressure tactics, if they have the mobilization of the public or the media, real catalysts for action, can push Togolese companies to ad hoc changes in practices. However, this is not possible when there are socio-economic, cultural and even political constraints preventing NGOs from fulfilling their role of monitoring companies in Togo.

In Togo, very few NGOs can claim to have forced companies to act on their complaints. This phenomenon is still at an embryonic stage and is essentially linked to the technical and financial means available to these organizations. For a lawyer, member of ATC: “We are the only ones in this context to take companies like Togo Telecom, Togo Cellulaire and Moov to courts of justice. Then we were joined by the Togolese Consumers League (LTC), the Togolese Human Rights League (LTDH), journalists associations, etc. Apart from this summons, we also called for a boycott on our social networks”.

4.2. Contingency factors linked to advocacy NGOs in their monitoring role

For most of the interviewees met within the framework of this study, ATC struggles to assert itself in its watchdog role for reasons that can be reduced to: (i) the shock of values (ii) reputation management difficulties within local companies.

4.2.1. ATC- Companies relations: the shock of values

Relations between ATC and companies in Togo are characterized by conflict, mistrust and ignorance. We can thus say that these relations are placed under the sign of a shock of values, with strong divergences of interests and objectives. Companies criticize ATC for being unrealistic, failing to understand the imperatives and constraints they face, and even for refusing to admit that their existence is a source of prosperity and jobs for society. For the representative of the Togocom Group: “The differences that oppose us to ATC are of course some misunderstandings, a bad apprehension of our intentions rather than a conflict ... Otherwise, they would not have called us as thieves and treated us with all the evils”.

ATC, on the other hand, perceives companies as solely focused on the pursuit of profit to the total detriment of the well-being and rights of citizens. An economist at the University of Lomé, a member of ATC, explains the behavior of Togolese consumers: “... companies do not respect Togolese citizens. That must change. Companies are only looking for profit; they do not respect the law and are above all arrogant. We have been talking about the formation of health and safety committees at work: our investigations indicate that no company is complying with the standards. This is contempt for workers. Unfortunately, accidents at WACEM and many other companies are the result of this disregard.”

The data collected show that the relations between companies and NGOs and consumer associations are marked by confrontation, which does not give a good image to companies considered as profiteers. These data indicate that ATC and companies make up two different worlds which confront each other around two logics: economic logic and social morality. Relations should evolve towards the initiation of a dialogue, or even the development of different forms of cooperation, under the impetus of the rise of ethical concerns in the business world. The downsides of globalization, both in the environmental and social domains, have led to the inquisition of the legitimacy of companies, large or small, which should force them to integrate sustainable development issues into their strategy. The implementation, within companies, of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies should result in a new management of relations with their stakeholders in order to better meet their expectations. This is justified by the fact that companies lack technical skills and proven experience in this field.

4.2.2. Reputation management difficulties within companies

There is a real difficulty in managing reputation in Togolese companies. This difficulty arises from the fact that this notion does not yet have a really established place within organizations.

For the sociologist, member of the ATC: “Beyond the ignorance of the word, our traditional society has values to which we must adhere. The cultural features of our society must adapt to the management of modern business.”

He adds that this requires the definition and dissemination of a code of good business conduct that should not be a simple slogan, symbolizing the ideal vision of a company, but conditions the behaviors of each worker. If this code of good conduct reflects the values of managerial policy, it will nonetheless be oriented towards compliance with procedures, which must be clearly defined, understood, accepted by all and easily applied, without permanent questioning.

Attempting to take stock of NGOs in Togo, Gogué (1991) outlines the major challenges they face. He already estimated that apart from the absence of a clear philosophy, the lack of human and financial resources often constitutes a serious handicap for Togolese NGOs in the realization of their program of activities, the financing of their operating budget, even that of setting up an operational administrative structure. The low participation of beneficiaries in the different phases of projects is a gap in the practice of NGOs in Togo; it does not reflect a desire on the part of NGOs not to respect the principle of associating the populations with the actions carried out. Rather, it should be seen as the consequence of the multiplicity of projects to be carried out by NGOs without sufficient experience and without qualified personnel. In addition, there is often confusion between the initiators of recently created NGOs and their executive managers, so that one can wonder whether the principle of benevolence is respected, even if that of volunteering seems to be present.

In addition, the weak involvement of the population in its actions and demands explains the fact that they do not really represent a “counter-power” vis-à-vis companies. This last element testifies to a lack of civic culture on the part of the people, who do not always feel concerned by the actions of NGOs. According to the Secretary General of ATC: “One of the biggest problems encountered by ATC and, likewise, all the NGOs and associations which fight for the well-being of the populations, is to make the latter understand that alongside their rights which must be safeguarded, there are duties from which they cannot escape. Citizens are motivated and ready to follow you when it comes to claiming their rights; but ask them to contribute 5 francs, and they disappear. Dare to tell them that a price increase on the market is in the public interest and they call you a sold-out person, a corrupt.”

5. Discussion of results

This work has sought to determine to what extent NGOs really have power over the reputation of companies and to try to identify the different impacts. Analysis of the data indicated that ATC is an influential actor on Togolese companies. However, with Crozier & Friedberg (1977), the actor is the one who plays a role in the organization on the basis of an imaginary (possibility of identifying with an ideal character or of concealing his personality) and of a functional aspect (in relation to a given situation). In this sense, ATC is a stakeholder (Pesqueux 2020) in the reputation of companies. The concept of stakeholder therefore offers a comprehensive perspective to socialization, making it possible to design an ideal type of role that combines business goals and ATC goals. It can therefore contribute to the sociology of organizations by reference to the notion of role. And it is also from the concept of role that we start to lead to that of play, a concept linked to the cultural models of a society, the stakeholders being able to be considered as a concrete socialization of these games. Perhaps the clearest contribution of stakeholder theory to the sociology of organizations is that it places more emphasis on the agential nature of the stakeholder rather than on its actor nature. In other words, stakeholders only exist in relation to each other.

Research has exposed reputation as an essential part of the management of organizations. The analysis of the data shows that the difficulties of reputation management in companies are a signal of increases in uncertainty about their conduct because it appears to be an anticipation of quality in a situation of imperfect information on its knowledge. The research results are in line with those of Teece et al. (1997) for whom reputation helps build a sustainable competitive advantage through the information that reputation conveys about the company in terms of resources that appear as signals and pledges of legitimacy. This competitive advantage is found in all fundamental dimensions of the company. The creation of a strong identity, (which will result in a strong reputation and a robust image) is an interesting strategy for developing positive attitudes towards the organization which will have effects in all areas (van Riel & Balmer, 1997).

Research results have shown that ATC and large Togolese companies are at the center of cooperations and competitions, each with their own intrinsic value. This description is used to explain characteristics, that is, specific logics and behaviors such as, for example, the nature of the organization, the way of thinking about the management of companies carried out by managers, how certain organizations are currently managed, the dissemination of societal information, the stakeholders targeted, the importance given to each stakeholder, etc.

This analysis agrees with those of Donaldson and Preston (1984) for whom the descriptive perspective conceptualizes the company as a place of reconciliation of the interests specific to each of them. But this descriptive approach does not make it possible to provide exploratory proposals or to make the connection between the management of stakeholders and the traditional objectives of the company (growth, profit, etc.).

It appears that the first false evidence of stakeholder theory is linked to its apparently descriptive character. As such, we could qualify this theoretical perspective as a “Mintzberg complex”. The reference to stakeholders also induces the false idea of the mutual independence of each of them from the others. In that sense, we are faced with the ubiquity of the concept. To that respect, moreover, the stakeholders are not there for dialogue, but to be spectators. This is what questions the dichotomy (not always obvious, by the way) between descriptive usage (a better description then?) And normative usage (we would then all be stakeholders or destined to be). This is how this joint dual usage of its descriptive aspect and its normative aspect tends to blur the difference between the presentation of the stakeholder and the representation that is made of his interests.

6. Conclusion

The modes of action and of direct pressure of NGOs influence the practices of companies in terms of their reputation, as can be seen from the research on the example of ATC. The analysis of the reputation of companies in Togo more generally indicates that the companies most criticized by NGOs are the large companies which ignore the notion of social responsibility in their practice. This testifies to the antagonism in the relations between “the new watchdogs of companies’ reputation” (Drullion 2004) and large companies in Togo.

Reputation generates perceptions in public opinion as a whole about what a company is, what it does, what it says and what it stands for. Reputation thus constitutes as much information and signals which allow the observer to predict, with more or less certainty, a future action.

For companies, reputation holds a central and special place. It affects the company: every person and every department, which represent each an essential element of the corporate system. It is cross-cutting and is equally shared by the company and its stakeholders. This duality leads many managers to reject the concept as a mere reception element. But if, on the contrary, it is considered as a source of signals, the conceptual strength can be revealed.

References

- Anani-Bossman A. A., Tella F., Suraya A. & Bonsu M. A. (2020). Crisis Communication and Ghana's Financial Sector. *Covenant Journal of Communication*. (7)1 : 53 – 83.
- Assogba Y. (1991). Les ONG et le développement en Afrique ou la face cachée de la lune. *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*. Volume 4, N°1 : 39-49.
- Baba, S., Moustaqim, R. & Begin E. (2016). Responsabilité sociale des entreprises : un regard historique à travers les classiques en management stratégique. *Vertigo*. Vol. 16, N° 2 (Consulté en ligne, le 11 mai 2021) <https://journals.openedition.org/vertigo/17715#entries>
- Bardin L. (2013). *L'analyse de contenu*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Beaudoin J.-P. (2005). L'opinion, c'est combien ? Pour une économie de l'opinion. Paris : Village Mondial.
- Binniger A.-S. & Robert I. (2007). ONG-entreprise : les liaisons dangereuses. *L'Expansion Management Review*. Vol. 127, no. 4 : 16-25.
- Boistel P. (2016). La réputation d'entreprise est-elle qu'un concept de réception ? *Sens- Dessous*. N° 18 : 29-37.
- _____ (2014). Réputation : un concept à définir. *Communication & Organisation*, vol. 46, no. 2 : 211-224.
- _____ (2008). La réputation d'entreprise : un impact majeur sur les ressources de l'entreprise. *Management & Avenir*, vol. 17, no. 3 : 9-25.
- _____ (2007). *Gestion de la communication d'entreprise*. Paris : Hermes Lavoisier.
- Borja de Mozota B. (1990). *Design & management*. Paris : Editions d'Organisation.
- Buisson M.-L. (2005). La gestion de la légitimité organisationnelle : un outil pour faire face à la complexification de l'environnement ? *Management & Avenir*, vol. 6, no. 4 : 147-164.
- Camic C. (1992). Reputation and Predecessor Selection : Parsons and the Institutionalists. *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 57, No. 4 : 421-445.
- Carroll A.B. & Buchholtz A.K. (2000). *Business and Society : Ethics and Stakeholder Management*, South-Western Publishing, 4^e édition, Cincinnati.
- Castel R. (2003). *L'insécurité sociale. Qu'est-ce qu'être protégé ?* Paris : Seuil.
- Chauvin P.-M. (2013). La sociologie des réputations. Une définition et cinq questions. *Communications*, vol. 93, no. 2 : 131-145.
- Clarkson M. B. (1995). A stakeholder framework for analysing and evaluating corporate social performance, *Academy of Management Review*. vol.20, n°1: 92-117.
- Donaldson T. & Preston L. (1995). The Stakeholder Theory of the Corporation: Concepts, Evidence, and Implications. *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 20, n°1, 1995: 65-91.

- Doucine M. (2007). *Les ONG : le contre-pouvoir ?*. Paris :Editions Toogezzer.
- Drullion K. (2004). Les ONG : « nouvelles sentinelles » de la réputation des entreprises. Mémoire de Master 2. Université de Paris IV – Sorbonne.
- Ferris G. R., Blass R., Douglas C., Kolodinsky R. W., & Treadway D. C. (2003), Personal Reputation in Organizations. In J. Greenberg (Ed.), *Organizational Behaviour : The State of the Science* : 211-246.
- Freeman E. R. (1984). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Pitman: Boston.
- Gendron C. (2001). Emergence de nouveaux mouvements sociaux économiques. *Revue Pour*, n° 172 : 175–181.
- Gendron C., Lapointe A. & Turcotte M.-F. (2004). Responsabilités sociale et régulation de l'entreprise mondialisée. *Relations industrielles*, Volume 59, N° 1 : 73–100
- Gogué A. T. (1991). Les ONG au Togo : bilan et défis des années à venir. *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*. Volume 4, N° 1 : 97-108
- Gorin V. (2013). La couverture médiatique de la guerre civile du Biafra au regard des enjeux humanitaires dans les médias français, suisses et américains (1967-1970). *Le Temps des médias*, vol. 21, no. 2 : 176-195.
- Guilbaud A. (2017). Transfert et continuités de la politisation à l'Organisation mondiale de la santé : le cas des substituts du lait maternel. *Critique internationale*. N° 76 : 101-119.
- Husted B.W. (1998). Organizational Justice and the management of stakeholder relations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 17, n°6: 643-651.
- Igalens J. & Joras M. (2002). *La responsabilité sociale de l'entreprise*. Paris : Editions d'Organisation.
- Laport D. (2011). L'insertion par l'économie, un processus de socialisation à revisiter dans une économie insulaire en construction. Le cas de la Martinique. *L'orientation scolaire et professionnelle* (Consulté en ligne, le 23 octobre 2020). URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/osp/3606>
- Mach A. (2002). Le pouvoir des ONG sur les entreprises : pression, partenariat, évaluation. *Annuaire suisse de politique de développement*. (Consulté en ligne, le 08 avril 2020). URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/aspd/936>
- Mitchell R. K., Agle B. R. & Wood D.J. (1997). Toward a theory of stakeholder Identification and Salience: Defining the principle of who and what really counts. *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22, n°4: 853-886.
- Mintzberg H. (1998). Structure et dynamique des organisations. Paris :Editions d'Organisation.
- Padioleau J. G. (1989). L'éthique est-il un outil de gestion ? *Revue Française de Gestion*. 82-91.
- Penrose E. (1959). *The theory of the growth of the firm*. New York: Wiley.
- Perroulaz G. (2004). Le rôle des ONG dans la politique de développement : forces et limites, légitimité et contrôle. *Annuaire Suisse de politique de développement*. 23-2 : 9-24. (Consulté en ligne, le 19 mai 2021). URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/aspd/446>
- Pesqueux Y. (2020). *La responsabilité sociale de l'entreprise (RSE): la " vieille " RSE d'avant les Accords de Paris de 2015 et de la pandémie covid-19 de 2020*. Thèse de doctorat, Conservatoire nationale des arts et métiers (CNAM), France.
- Pigé B. & Bigou-Laré N. (2015). La représentation de la performance des entreprises au Togo. *Prospective et stratégie*, vol. n° 6 : 115-135.
- Pirard R. (2010). *Le sujet postmoderne entre symptôme et jouissance*. Érès.
- Renaud A. & Berland N. (2007). Mesure de la performance globale des entreprises. « *Comptabilité et environnement* », Poitiers, France. pp. CD-Rom. halshs-00544875
- Roberts P. W. & Dowling G. R. (2002). Corporate reputation and sustained superior financial performance. *Strategic Management Journal*, Volume 23: 1077-1093.
- Robertson, T. S., Zielinski J. & Ward S. (1984). *Consumer Behavior*, Glenview, IL : Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Sifaoui O. & Rouquette S. (2017). L'image de l'enfant dans la stratégie de communication de l'Unicef. *Revue française des sciences de l'information et de la communication*. (Consulté en ligne, le 18 mai 2021). URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rfsic/3088>
- Teece D. J., Pisano G. & Shuen A. (1997). Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 18: 509-533.
- Torres-Blay O. (2000). *Economie d'entreprise : Organisation et stratégie à l'aube de la nouvelle économie*. Paris : Economica.
- van Riel C. B. M. & Balmer J. (1997). Corporate Identity : the Concept, its Measurement and Management. *European Journal of Marketing*, Volume n° 31 novembre 5/6: 340/354.
- Weil P. (1990). *Communication oblige, communication institutionnelle et de management*. Paris : Editions d'Organisation.
- Whitmeyer J. M. (2000). Effects of Positive Reputation Systems. *Social Science Research*. Volume 29, Issue 2: 188-207.