A Citizen Survey in the District of Steinfurt, Germany: Insights into the Local Perceptions of the Social and Environmental Activities of Enterprises in Their Region

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Abstract: Starting from the extended corporate citizenship (CC) perspective, this article focuses on the perceptions of residents in the district of Steinfurt, Germany, regarding the social and environmental activities of enterprises in their region. In a citizen survey, in the district, 1,003 households—selected by a Random-Route-Procedure—were interviewed using a partly standardized questionnaire. The results of the explorative and descriptive study show that approximately, only half of the interviewees associated social and environmental activities with enterprises in the region. The answers point towards a wide diversity of understandings. Furthermore, less than one-fifth feel well-informed about the theses activities. This hints towards a lack of information, which could be tackled by targeted communication. When asked about prioritization, most interviewees consider social activities for employees to be more relevant. In the environmental field, a majority favor local action being taken by enterprises locally, in order to prevent environmental damage in the surrounding area. These results suggest that the direct impact with regard to measures is crucial for citizens’ perceptions. In addition, residents highlight the issue of employment as a main role of enterprises in the region. This may offer an anchor point for enterprises to develop social activities that are highly relevant to the citizens.

Keywords: citizen survey; corporate social responsibility (CSR); corporate citizenship (CC); employment; sustainability communication

1. Introduction

In its flagship report, “World in Transition—A Social Contract for Sustainability” the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) defines the need for a global remodeling of the economy towards sustainable development [1]. Thereby, sustainable development not only consists of economic perspectives, but also environmental and social ones [2]. Many enterprises conduct sustainability activities that are motivated for a variety of reasons [3]. Among other motivations, these activities may give a competitive advantage, as they can, for example, be beneficial to internal and external stakeholder relationships and improve corporate reputation [4–6].
There are different conceptual frameworks that deal with the sustainability activities of enterprises. Besides the concepts that are related to the core business, such as social entrepreneurship [7], amongst the most important are corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate citizenship (CC) [8]. Although the CSR approach remains stronger within the context of a company’s core business operations (e.g., by concentrating on supplier or employee relationship management), in this article, we use the perspective of CC, which views enterprises as being corporate citizens of specific communities.

In both the academic and practitioner literatures, CC and CSR concepts are defined and used in inconsistent and partly overlapping manners [9–11]: in the limited view, CC forms part of CSR as a philanthropic commitment of an enterprise (e.g. corporate volunteering or corporate giving) [12]; in the equivalent view, CC and CSR are used as congruent terms [13,14]; and the extended view of CC emphasizes the corporation in its role as “a political actor administering the citizenship rights of individual stakeholders” [2] (p. 70). In this view, enterprises—as citizens amongst others—have rights, but also responsibilities [15], as contributors to the public interest [16]. Philanthropic commitment and CSR activities are part of their responsible behavior. The extended view of CC highlights the various reciprocal interlinkages and dependencies between enterprises and the community [17]; This includes the provision of perspectives to sociopolitical challenges [18]: in the context of this study, the structural problems of a rural area—shrinking populations and the migration of qualified employees [19,20].

The parallel existence of the various perspectives in the literature shows that there is a broadness of interpretations referring to how and in which ways enterprises should assume responsibility and advance sustainable development. As residents/citizens are an important group of stakeholders, this study investigates the expectations of citizens of a region—the rural administrative district of Steinfurt—regarding these issues. The leading questions are: What perceptions do the citizens of Steinfurt have about the social and environmental activities of the enterprises in their surroundings? How informed do they feel? What do they expect in terms of the regional activities carried out by these enterprises? Corresponding answers can help to better design the future communication processes of enterprises in Steinfurt in order, for example, to improve their regional reputations, and to attract employees. This could also offer insights into other regions. Because the citizen perceptions of the social and environmental activities of enterprises in their region have not been addressed before (Section 2), we use an explorative study design combining open and closed questions (Section 3), interviewing 1,003 households within the district of Steinfurt, a rural area in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). We present descriptive results from the perspective of the residents, according to: the perception of social and environmental activities of enterprises in the region, addressing the understanding and relevance of these activities (Section 4.1), the knowledge levels and wishes of the citizens regarding social and environmental activities (Section 4.2), the expectations of the citizens in terms of regional activities carried out by the enterprises (Section 4.3). After discussing the results, addressing the limitations of this study and indicating the future research needed (Section 5), the main conclusions are drawn (Section 6).

2. Positioning in the Existing Literature and the Starting Point of Our Research

2.1. Why Focus on the Citizen Perception of Sustainability Activities of Enterprises?

There are multiple theoretical concepts and models, stemming mostly from psychology, sociology, and microeconomics, which are used and criticized in sustainability literature to explore investment or consumption decisions (e.g., theories of the household [21], rational choice theories [22,23], and the norm-activation model [24]). Another large portion of the investigation focuses on the impact that sustainability activities have on the attractiveness of enterprises for employees and applicants [14,25,26]. This kind of work is mostly based on social identity theory, such as organizational identity theory [27], and it assumes that “individuals generally strive for a positive self-concept, which is affected by organizational membership” [13] (p. 458) and claims that actors feel committed to a company if personal values are observed as being key values of the company as well. Sustainability activities may function as indicators of the organizational values, and a stage for identification [26,28–30].
internal benefits for enterprises were often attributed to finding new employees or to making the work more attractive for current ones [13,30,31], consumer research uses this theory as well, showing that positive associations may enhance the evaluations of enterprises [32].

These examples of theories explaining consumption decisions all build upon the idea that actors first need to feel informed before they can make a decision. As such, communication of the activities in an adequate manner seems to be at the core, in order to gain recognition or to receive recognition at all. Öberseder et al. [33] suggest that companies should focus less on marketing, and more instead on the communication of the authentic company’s image. The intention to communicate relevant information in a better way is also reflected in the literature on labels and their usage. One study [34] shows, for example, that 10 to 12 percent of customers use labels to get information about a product. What is it that actors perceive as being adequate information? What do actors, especially citizens living close to enterprises, conducting sustainability activities, actually perceive to be sustainability activities?

The importance of considering stakeholder perceptions is recognized in the existing literature [35]. Especially for the target group of consumers, much investigation has been done in order to examine the impact of enterprises’ sustainability activities on evaluations and consumption processes [33,36–41]. However, it has been pointed out that many consumers are unable to name enterprises that stand out for their sustainable activities, and the level of CSR awareness seems to be low [33,42–45].

The studies so far focus on either the internal benefits for companies carrying out social and environmental activities—usually attributed to finding new employees or making the work more attractive for current employees—or the external benefits—mostly related to customer satisfaction, customer recruitment and labelling of products according to their particular characteristics [46,47]. Other studies evaluate how sustainability activities influence the customer willingness to pay [48], or they focus on the competitive advantages regarding the environmental proactivity of enterprises [49]. While we refer to this literature, we take a different perspective. We link to this literature, but we note that the perceptions that citizens have about sustainability activities and what they understand them to be have not yet been openly investigated. This is crucial for later identifying what is needed to improve the visibility and the effects of the sustainability activities of enterprises for communicating or evaluating these activities. Rather than focusing on the implementation of sustainability activities from the enterprise perspective, this contribution concentrates on the (potential) addressees in the sense of what the citizens of the region realize from this implementation, starting on a small scale with one district, to begin gaining insight into this topic.

The capabilities of the citizens, and their potential influences in a direct and dialogical way, are emphasized in the literature: “Private citizens also play an important role in the planning and implementation of sustainability programs at the local level, because they give input to the debate” [50] (p. 242). Thus, citizens are not only seen as consumers but as stakeholders with an influence in the region that the enterprises are a part of. In this sense, the stakeholder group holds a powerful position, as “participation by residents is an essential element in the successful pursuit of sustainability and environmental protection” [51] (p. 13). Against this background, the citizens’ perspectives should be explored appropriately. To investigate citizen perceptions, and taking the extended views of CC as introduced above, we base our study on the approach of perceived CC, as this “conceptualization refers to individual evaluations and interpretations of business activity, not necessarily actual firm actions” [13] (p. 458).

2.2. Social and Environmental Activities

As we are aware of the different types of content that can be addressed with the term ‘sustainability’ (Section 1) we focus in our study on the social and environmental activities of enterprises. Social and environmental activities are often comprised under CSR activities [52,53]. In the literature, one can find different social or environmental activities that are conducted by enterprises [52,54,55]. The social activities can be clustered into: social activities for employees/workplace CSR (e.g., flexible working arrangements, daycare facilities, or workplace health promotion), social activities for the region (e.g.,
the support of sport associations or social projects in the administrative district), society in general (e.g., the support of global charities or claiming liability for the working conditions of suppliers) [54–58]. Environmental activities/environment-related CSR can be clustered into: activities in the scope of resource consumption (like more efficient production process design), environmental activities in the scope of climate protection/energy (e.g., reduction of energy consumption or the use of renewable energies), the prevention of environmental damage in the surrounding area (e.g., the avoidance of air or water pollution) [53]. For studying the citizen perception of the social and environmental activities of enterprises in the surrounding areas (Section 4.1), we chose a design that gave room for the perceptions of the interviewees to be voiced, by including open questions in the questionnaire (see Section 3).

2.3. Level of Information

To our knowledge, only one significant study exists regarding citizen perceptions and expectations towards responsible entrepreneurship in Germany [59]. The results of that study show that only one-quarter of the interviewees feel well-informed about activities in the context of social responsibility. As addressed above, this indicates that the presence of a serious issue being adequate information is an essential basis for evaluating the performances of enterprises [33]. The cited study [59] was German-wide without a regional focus. In our study, we address the question of how a given group of citizens—in the district of Steinfurt—may think about the social and environmental activities of enterprises in their vicinity, and how well-informed they feel. As is already pointed out above, communication activities obtain a special role in this context, as they enable an increase awareness [45] and—ultimately—(potentially) positive attributions towards the responsible company [60]. Our study not only aims to gain a clearer picture about how well-informed the citizens of this particular rural region feel, but also if they would like to be informed regarding the social and environmental activities of enterprises in the region (see Section 4.2).

2.4. The Corporate Citizenship of Enterprises in a Region and Citizen Expectation

Taking into account the low awareness of the consumers regarding social or environmental activities, as outlined above, it would be particularly interesting to know whether if this applies in a similar way to citizens in the immediate vicinity of enterprises. From the view of the CC concept, enterprises are seen as corporate citizens of specific communities, e.g., a region, like the residents in the community [9,61]. We use the term ‘region’ to mean an administrative district (translating the German term “Kreis”, which is similar to the term “county”, but with an official local administration), which is an area that is bigger than a village or a town, but smaller than a state. The enterprises and the residents in the region are acting inside the same community, which is part of the same socio-spatial environment, which means that the residents can be directly affected by the enterprises’ actions, e.g., manufacturing issues, and their social and environmental consequences. In addition, one can assume that most of the residents are employees of the enterprises in the region. For our study, we chose the regional boundaries of a district, because the citizens might have a better picture in mind, compared to a German-wide study ([59], see above) when asked to evaluate the social and environmental activities of the enterprises in Steinfurt, the region in which they are living. To our knowledge, there has been no study so far in the CC literature that has studied citizen perceptions for social and environmental activities within a specific regional boundary, even though CC refers mainly to the local engagement of enterprises [9,61]. Studies have shown that a geographic focus is of relevance, as there exist different traditions that refer to the public engagement of enterprises—especially between Europe and the USA [42,60]. In our study, the goal is not to evaluate specific regional characteristics, and their influence on citizen perception of social and environmental activities of enterprises in the region (see Section 5 on the future research activities needed). Rather, we want to evaluate the perceptions of citizens living and working in the same region as the enterprises that carry out these social and environmental activities, which might raise the degree of enterprise awareness in comparison, e.g., to a German-wide study [59]. This will provide a first step towards studying citizen awareness regarding social and environmental activities in a region.
In order to gain insights into the perceptions of social and environmental activities, one has to take into account that the “businesses should operate in a neighborly manner and concern themselves with their impact on their fellow citizens” [62] (p. 66). Besides the impact of the core business in the region, “there are many community and geographic levels at which companies can focus their CSR efforts” [62] (p 66), referring to [63]. Especially, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have a strong regional impact [64], due to their strong local and regional anchoring: as major local and regional stakeholders [65], they often prefer to adjust their voluntary activities locally/regionally [66]. This may have an impact on citizens’ perceptions; Russell and Russell (2010) show that activities with a local focus are of greater personal relevance for people, and enhance companies’ reputations [62]. Thus, we also address the question of what contributions citizens expect from enterprises which state that they contribute in their region, and the types of regional activities that are expected by the citizens (Section 4.3).

3. Materials and Methods

In order to answer the research questions, we conducted an explorative and descriptive survey among the citizens of the region of Steinfurt between September and November 2016. To conduct a population survey, a clearly defined spatial framework is needed. The heterogeneity of the business landscape (which does not exist in an exclusively urban context in this way) is one of the factors in favor of selecting a region, such as the administrative district that is examined here. A further—research-practical—reason for the selection of the district lies in the project framework in which the study took place. The administrative district of Steinfurt, with 437,000 residents in total, is located north of Münster (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany). It was chosen for three main reasons, which are helpful for the citizen perception of the social and environmental activities of the enterprises in the region. Firstly, in Steinfurt, there is a strong commitment to sustainability issues. The district administration is especially well-engaged in the sustainable development of the rural area, and hence, it conducts social and environmental projects, e.g., energieland2050 (with the goal of renewable energy self-sufficiency for the district by the year 2050), as well as projects for regional development within the scope of the EU program LEADER. The Department of Climate Protection and Sustainability (AKN) is the main administrative body that governs sustainability activities inside the district. A special activity of the AKN applies to the sustainable development of local businesses. Secondly, the AKN and other actors in Steinfurt provide various forms of dialogue for citizens and local stakeholder groups in relation to regional sustainability issues, such as sustainable energy use and a sustainable local economy. Thirdly, as introduced above, Steinfurt is a rural area with a high number of SMEs (≤249 employees): there is a total of 2456 SMEs that are located in the district, with 85,943 employees, compared to the 57 large enterprises (>249 employees) located in the district, with 33,536 employees.

Support by the district administration (by supporting reporting in the local newsletter, providing a cover letter from the head of the district for the survey), as well as cooperation with the AKN as a project partner (see Acknowledgements) was very helpful for conducting the citizen survey in Steinfurt, and it encouraged a high level of willingness to participate. Executed by the SOKO Institute for Social Research and Communication (located in Bielefeld, Germany), the quantitative survey was realized through Computer-Assisted Personal and Telephone Interviews (CAPI/CATI), with an average duration of 15 minutes per interview.

The basic set of this survey covered all adult citizens in the administrative district of Steinfurt. For the sampling method, the Random-Route Procedure was applied. This method guarantees the potential inclusion of all households (in contrast to telephone surveys, with random selections of telephone numbers without the inclusion of the subgroup of mobile-only). The sample was gained in a multilevel selection procedure, which consists of a random selection of 40 sampling points, a random selection of 1003 households after the Random-Route-Procedure (with explicit regulations for selection and visit) and a random selection of one target person in every selected household, based on the last-birthday procedure.
Data collection was primarily pursued through face-to-face interviews (complemented by telephone interviews in cases where target persons could not be encountered several times at home, or who were not willing to conduct face-to-face interviews). On that basis, we obtained a quantity of 1,003 entirely conducted and usable interviews.

As the sampling showed a deviant age distribution from the basic set, a weighting of the data was executed with regard to the attributes of age and gender. After this final step, the distributions of the attributes of age, gender, and educational level were as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Sampling structure (N = 1003).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Manifestation</th>
<th>Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group</td>
<td>16–34</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35–49</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50–64</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Level</td>
<td>No leaving qualification/Basic secondary school leaving qualification (from a Hauptschule)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary school leaving qualification (from a Realschule)/Certificate of aptitude for specialized higher education</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University entrance qualification/A-levels</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The design of the questionnaire followed the research questions described above, and it was shaped by literature findings (Section 2). As addressed in Section 2, we first used open questions, in order to gain data that was unbiased from predetermined categories about the understandings of social and environmental activities, and expectations in terms of activities that were carried out in the region by the enterprises, and thus, to gain an uninfluenced impression of the people, and also to avoid socially desirable answers. These questions were followed by closed questions (e.g., regarding the evaluation of different forms of social and environmental activities).

Besides the introduced content in Section 2 (Sections 2.1 and 2.2: perceptions of the social and environmental activities of enterprises in the region; Section 2.3: level of information that citizens possess on the activities of enterprises in the region; Section 2.4: citizen expectations of regional activities carried out by the enterprises in the region) the questionnaire also contained questions of sociodemographic variables, and questions about the relevance and evaluation of regional characteristics, which are not treated/reproduced in this article. The study was conducted within a transdisciplinary research project (see Acknowledgements). This is why further questions (not replicated in this article) with information for the regional partners from the district were integrated into the questionnaire. This narrowed down the amount space that we had for the other topics.

We did not ask about citizen perceptions of specific companies, in order to avoid product evaluations, which might come into an individual’s mind when they are asked about a specific enterprise. Instead we asked about perceptions on the enterprises in the district of Steinfurt as a whole, in order to gain insights into these citizens’ perceptions of enterprises in the region. All of the questions that we used in this study are included in the results section.

The answers to the open questions were analyzed in a qualitative way, using the analysis software MAXQDA for merging and categorizing the collected data. The answers to the closed questions were analyzed quantitatively via the software SPSS Statistics, with a focus on gaining descriptive results.

**4. Results**

This section summarizes the Steinfurt citizens’ understanding of the social and environmental activities of enterprises in their region (Section 4.1.1, results of the qualitative analysis) as well as their
4.1. Understanding and Relevance of the Social and Environmental Activities

4.1.1. Understanding of the Social and Environmental Activities

In order to find out what the interviewees (N = 1003) link to the social and environmental activities of the enterprises, they were encouraged to associate openly with this topic (the concrete question/instruction was: "Now we would like to talk about diverse forms of the social and environmental activities of enterprises in the district of Steinfurt. While doing so, please bear in mind all kinds of enterprises—from the small bakery next door to the medium-sized company in the industrial park, and branch locations of large companies, as well as public companies like transport services and public utilities. What do you primarily think about the social and ecological activities of enterprises?") Results showed that approximately only half of the interviewees commented on these questions (for the field of social activities: n = 555, for the field of ecological activities: n = 460).

Taking a closer look at the statements about social activities (see Figure 1), we observed a wide diversity of answers. Many of the answers mentioned concrete activities that take place outside of companies: e.g., sponsoring local associations (especially in the sports sector), funding volunteer work, activities for children and young adults, and activities in the field of integration and inclusion (especially for people with migrant backgrounds or with disabilities). These citations mostly fell within the frames of corporate volunteering or corporate giving (see Section 1). Another group of answers focused on activities inside enterprises, and referred mostly to classical workplace—CSR (see Section 2.2) activities (in particular, family-friendly working arrangements and workplace health promotion). Other statements evaluated the issue as a whole (a majority of these could be summarized as "enterprises have to do more;" some could be condensed as "the commitments are sufficient"). There were also unclear statements. Some interviewees named specific enterprises that were related to especially social activities (e.g. banks or public utilities, SMEs). Besides miscellaneous mentions, some respondents expressed that they had "no idea" about that field.

In the field of environmental activities (see Figure 2), people mainly mention concrete activities of enterprises. In contrast to the social activities, the interviewees here focused more on internal environment-related CSR measures, than on activities that are external to the enterprises. The field of climate protection (e.g., the use of renewable energies and the use of technologies in order to reduce energy and resource consumption in the enterprise), as well as waste management and recycling played an important role. As for activities in external compensatory measures (e.g. tree planting), environmental measures in general, the prevention of environmental damage and the funding of sustainable mobility were mentioned. In this case, people additionally lamented a "lack of transparency", and expressed the opinion that "companies are not really interested in environmental commitments," aside from a few voices who expressed that there are sufficient levels of activities. Furthermore, interviewees named environmental initiatives and associations (e.g. NABU—Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union; BUND—Friends of the Earth Germany) without linking them directly to a corporate context. Also named were ecologically working economy sectors (such as the organic farming sector) and specific enterprises that interviewees related to environmental activities (in particular, public utilities). They also named municipal activities (e.g., municipal bioenergy parks or the sustainability certification of specific municipalities). As well as miscellaneous mentions, there were again some people who expressed they had "no idea" about this field.
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**Figure 1.** Understanding of social activities.

**Figure 2.** Understanding of environmental activities.
4.1.2. Relevance of Social and Environmental Activities

To find out what degree of relevance citizens attributed to different kinds of social and environmental activities, they were questioned in a two-stage procedure. First, they were requested to rate the given activities on a scale from (1) irrelevant to (5) very relevant. In a second step, they were asked to prioritize one of the activities (in the following, the answers given in the questionnaire are marked iteratively).

Within the scope of social activities (see Figure 3, n = 997–1000, “Please continue thinking concretely on enterprises in the administrative district of Steinfurt. How important is it to you that the enterprises conduct the following social activities?”), a majority of the interviewees (64%) rated social activities for employees (e.g., flexible working arrangements, daycare facilities or workplace health promotion) as very relevant. Approximately two-fifths of the interviewees (43%) evaluated social activities for the region (e.g., support of sport associations or social projects in the administrative district) and social activities for the society in general (39%, e.g., support of global charities or liability for working conditions of suppliers) as very relevant. Although all three activities gained relatively high evaluations, there was a clear ranked arrangement when it comes to prioritization (n = 972, “Which of the mentioned activities is the most relevant to you by comparison?”): the majority favored social activities for employees (62%) over social activities for the society in general (25%) and social activities for the region (13%).

![Figure 3. Relevance attributions to social activities.](image)

Regarding the field of environmental activities (see Figure 4, n = 986–1001, “Please continue thinking concretely on enterprises in the administrative district of Steinfurt. How important is it to you that the enterprises conduct the following ecological activities?”), three-quarters of the interviewees (76%) rated the prevention of environmental damage in the surrounding area (e.g. avoidance of air or water pollution) as being very relevant. Fewer persons—but still approximately one half—rated environmental activities in the scope of climate protection/energy (60%, e.g. reduction of energy consumption or use of renewable energies) and environmental activities in the scope of resource consumption (48%, e.g. more efficient design of production processes) as being very relevant. Within the question of prioritization (n = 951, “Which of the mentioned activities is the most relevant to you by comparison?”), a majority chose the prevention of environmental damage in the surrounding area (61%) over environmental activities in the scope of climate protection/energy (24%) and activities in the scope of resource consumption (15%).

Although each of the environmental activities were marked with high importance in the first step (by at least approximately half of the interviewees), when they were asked for concrete prioritization between social and environmental activities (n = 921) (“If the enterprises in the district of Steinfurt commit themselves voluntarily, they should preferably do this in: the social or the environmental field?”), almost three-quarters (72%) answered that they found it more crucial for enterprises to become active in the social sector, while just over a quarter (28%) prioritized the environmental sector.
Addressing the topics of whether the people want to be informed, and how informed people feel regarding the social and environmental activities of enterprises in the region, Figure 5 shows the results. For the question “To what extent are you interested in information about social and ecological activities of local enterprises?” (n = 991), almost two-fifths of the interviewees (37%) answered with Yes, I am generally interested. A slightly bigger portion (42%) answered with “That depends on the particular kind of product or service.” One-fifth (21%) expressed, “No, I am generally not interested.” This means that a majority of the interviewees are interested in knowing about the social and environmental performance of enterprises, even if some of them attach this interest to certain conditions.

The next question was only posed to the interviewees who stated to be interested, or interested under certain conditions, in social and environmental activities. To the question “How well do you...
feel informed about the social and environmental activities of the enterprises in the region?” (n = 775) less than one-fifth (19%) of the respondents answered they felt well-informed (4 and 5 on a scale from 1 “very badly” to 5 “very well”).

4.3. Expectations of the Citizens in Terms of Regional Activities by the Enterprises

For addressing the question of the expectation of the citizens’ in terms of regional activities carried out by enterprises in their region, people were asked the open question “What does it mean for you, or what associations do you make, if an enterprise characterizes itself as regional?” (n = 886, see Figure 6). More people gave an answer to this open question, compared to the response to the issues of social and environmental activities (see Section 4.1.1). The results show a strong focus on the topic of regional employment. Besides that, other answers circulated around the issue of local production (of regional raw materials/of materials from regional suppliers) as well as local sales in connection with short transportation distances and sustainability. The enterprise’s location was a central dimension, which came up within the mentioned open question. While some say that a company can describe itself as being regional if it is located in the surroundings without specifying a radius, fewer people mentioned a maximum radius of 100, 50, or 30 kilometers; others still called it regional, only if an enterprise was located within the administrative district or the municipality. Here, it becomes obvious that the terms ‘regional’ or ‘region’, which we used for the district of Steinfurt (see Section 2.4), have a considerable degree of vagueness and broadness for people. In addition, interviewees underlined the importance of regional investment, local headquarter location and the paying of taxes. Furthermore, the maintenance of regional social activities and closeness/closer contact with the citizens were elements that were ascribed to regional companies. Additionally, for (mostly favorable) evaluations, the interviewees named specific branches (e.g., regional food production, and trade or crafts) and SMEs, as well as family-owned companies. As well as miscellaneous mentions, there are again some people who express they have “no idea” about this field.

Figure 6. The understanding of regional activities.
5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to gain a picture of citizens’ perceptions in the district of Steinfurt, of the social and environmental activities of the enterprises in the region, their level of informedness, and their expectations about the activities of enterprises in the district. The residents in the district of Steinfurt were requested to openly associate their links to the social and environmental activities of enterprises in their region. Within this scope, a wide diversity of understandings were observed. Furthermore, it is notable that only approximately half of the 1003 persons gave answers to this question. This result may lead to the assumption that a relevant fraction of people might not link anything with the social and environmental activities of the enterprises. Moreover, conceptual vagueness and unfamiliarity may be considered as explanations for the results found in our study. This fits with similar findings in consumer research, where it has been indicated that the CSR concept can hardly be processed by addressees, because of its broadness and complexity [60]. However, the present study pursued a qualitative open-data collection approach, only to a certain extent. A qualitative approach such as semi-structured interviews might help to explore perceptions in more detail [67].

When it comes to the question of the prioritization of particular social and environmental activities, it appears that the closeness experienced was crucial for citizens’ perceptions: a majority of the interviewees rated social activities for employees and the prevention of environmental damage in the surrounding area as being the most important in the respective fields. This means that most people seemed to give higher evaluations to activities that had a direct effect (e.g., providing employment), and to topics that related to their personal concerns. Social and environmental activities that do not (or to a lesser extent) target a particular group of people, or that only contribute in a more general way (e.g., ecological activities in the scope of climate protection/ energy or social activities for the society in general) were evaluated as being less relevant. This result reflects similar findings that show personal concern must be seen as a core factor [33] for the positive evaluations of sustainability activities. Following this perspective, people’s assessments improve “when a company’s actions are perceived as benefiting one’s in-group” [62] (p. 75). Interestingly, a clear preference can be observed in our study for enterprises running social activities over environmental activities. As an explanation, again the factor of personal impact, or rather, everyday-life experience, may be applied, as most interviewees are also employees (either currently, in the past, or in the future). This means that people’s belonging, or rather, self-identification with the target group of employees seems to be of special significance (c.f. also [68,69]).

The finding described above is emphasized by another result of our study: regional employment was the most often-addressed topic when interviewees were asked about what actions they expected from enterprises in their region. This is compatible with findings in the literature that summarize people’s opinions that the enterprise’s “main responsibility at the local level is to create and maintain jobs despite recessions and by remaining in the region” [60] (p. 1848). In doing so, enterprises give back in a very direct way to the community from which they benefit [60]. In addition a significantly higher number of interviewees answered the open question about their expectations of enterprise action in the region, in comparison with open requests about social and environmental activities. This may indicate that the topic was of higher familiarity for people. As the interviewees seemed to be more connected to the issue of employment, this may be a promising anchor point for developing related sustainability activities that meet citizens’ personal concerns, which might enhance the perception of these activities. Hence, it would be conceivable to think of programs, for instance, that bring the local youth into early contact with the enterprises in the region in their role as employers—such as targeted means through internship programs, and permanent collaborations with regional educational institutions.

Directly comparing the relevance of social and environmental activities (see Section 4.1.2.), almost three-quarters evaluate social activities as more relevant than environmental activities. This is not surprising as interviewees may see only little connection points with environmental activities regarding their lives; or these points are too abstract/ indirect (e.g., measures concerning resource conservation).
The exploration of connection points is hence a major task to develop environmental activities of high relevance to the regional residents. As has already been pointed out in the literature, communication that is targeted at the relevant recipients allows enterprises to “engage their stakeholders more effectively” [70] (p. 438). Ongoing and inclusive communication processes between enterprises and the regional citizenship thus seems to be of importance. Following this perspective, citizens may develop from passive residents to become active collaborators and partners. This can ensure that the expectations and preferences of this key stakeholder groups are addressed adequately. In the literature, it is pointed out that the possibilities of engaging the general public in discussions about sustainability issues are increased if the discussions are put into a more familiar context [71].

The information from this study builds the basis for making judgments by comparing the social and environmental activities of different enterprises [43]. Within the present study, four-fifths of the interviewees declared an interest in information (in general or depending on the product/service) about the social and environmental activities of the enterprises in their region. Although this result should be treated with a certain degree of cautiousness—against the background of a social desirability bias—it opens up the potential for further communication processes between enterprises and citizens. These may form a lasting dialog, as a platform to discuss potential conflicts and to evaluate sustainability activities [72]. Following this perspective, the civic surrounding of an enterprise moves away from being a passive recipient to being an active partner. In doing so, a “shared value” [73] (p. 137) is created, meaning that not only do citizens benefit from enterprises’ activities, but they can indeed help enterprises to detect social and environmental development potentials [73]. At this point, one needs to keep in mind that we took the CC perspective for our article, assuming that enterprises are corporate citizens of their region. We do not assume that every enterprise has an interest in the above outlined dialogue, but the ones who do feel a strong responsibility for their regions in terms of regional commitment and sustainability issues may find helpful steps for enhancing their social and environmental activities and the perception of these.

Here, most importantly, our study detects a lack of information on the side of the interviewees: less than one-fifth of the interviewees felt well-informed about the social and environmental activities of the enterprises in the region (n = 775, the ones who are interested or interested under certain conditions in being informed). This is a similar result to the Lunau et al. (2003) German-wide survey, which showed that only one-quarter of the interviewees felt well-informed about activities in the context of social responsibility [59]. One explanation for this finding may be that when people only have vague ideas and little information, they tend to overlook this information [33]. The focus on a region (with regional closeness of citizens and enterprises) in our survey does not seem to be a big influencing factor on the level of information that citizens show about the social and environmental activities of enterprises. The awareness and level of information about social and environmental activities is also influenced by what the enterprises communicate [33,45]. Especially, SMEs often do not use social and environmental activities in their stakeholder communication [3]. This factor of influence is not easy to capture, and future research will be needed, with comparative surveys in regions in which the enterprises communicate their sustainability activities to different extents, which are not easy to categorize/determine. In addition, regional characteristics of the district of Steinfurt may have various influences on the level of information, and also the perceptions of social and environmental activities of the enterprises in the region, like the strong commitments of the administration, with its various sustainability projects and citizen participation offers, or the high amount of SMEs in the district (see Section 3). To take a closer look at these issues it would be necessary to undertake further research in other rural areas without district authorities showing such commitments and others with a lower amount of SMEs. In terms of comparability, it would be crucial to stay within Germany, as different countries show distinct traditions of communication between enterprises and the civic surroundings [74,75], which may subsequently influence perceptions. Further comparative studies are needed.
6. Conclusions

The central findings of this study show that while most of the interviewed citizens in the district of Steinfurt hold an interest in information about the social and environmental activities of enterprises in their region, overall, there was a lack of understanding and information in the district. This indicates that if enterprises want to make increased use of their social and environmental activities (in order to improve reputation, attract employees, etc., or just to be perceived as a ‘good’ corporate citizens in the region), they have to spring into action to keep the regional public better informed. To do so, they should aim to reduce the complexity of incoming information. Moreover, communication should be oriented to the particular target group, with regard to the special characteristics and interests of the particular stakeholder group. By doing so, sustainability activities may lose vagueness for the people. If citizens have enough information, they can evaluate whether the activities of the enterprises in their region meet their personal concerns. Enterprises should be—above all—aware of their roles as employers for the residents in their region. In this context, issues of employment not only seem to represent a major responsibility for enterprises in the region in the view of the citizens, but they are also a connection factor that can be used to attract interest, and to develop the sustainability activities of high relevance for the regional citizenry. Creating a dialog between citizens and enterprises may help in the discussion of sustainability activities, and for detecting the potential of social and environmental development. This can be seen as a long-term investment into the social capital of a region; in return, enterprises will gain the chance to explore and to develop their regional potential.

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