
THE ROLE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of corporate social responsibility and technological innovation in the transformation of agricultural production in Serbia. The study is based on quantitative empirical research conducted on a sample of one hundred agricultural holdings and agri-food companies. The results indicate a positive relationship between socially responsible practices and production performance, as well as increasing investments in innovative technologies during the observed period. The synergy between corporate social responsibility and technological innovation is identified as an important factor in improving efficiency, environmental sustainability, and competitiveness in agricultural production. However, broader implementation is limited by financial constraints, insufficient knowledge, and moderate levels of digital adoption. The findings emphasize the importance of targeted education, institutional support, and accelerated digital transformation for the sustainable development and long-term competitiveness of the agricultural sector.

Introduction

Agriculture faces challenges arising from climate change, global population growth and the need for sustainable food production. Increasing pressure on natural resources, changing weather conditions and the need to preserve biodiversity further complicate the

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functioning of modern agricultural systems. In this context, the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and technological innovation becomes crucial for the transformation of agricultural production. (Gyamfi et al. 2024) In this study, CSR was measured through selected social and environmental practices, while technological innovation was assessed through the adoption of modern digital and production technologies.

CSR in agriculture implies responsible business that takes into account ecological, social and economic aspects, and contributes to the development of local communities and the preservation of natural resources. By including sustainable practices in the value chain - from cultivation, processing, distribution, to relations with consumers - CSR can become a driver of long-term stability and competitiveness in the agricultural sector (Berber et al., 2021; Aleksić et al., 2024).

Technological innovations, on the other hand, enable more efficient and precise management of agricultural production. In Serbia, the adoption of modern technologies such as drones, soil sensors, satellite monitoring and automated irrigation systems contributes to increasing productivity and reducing the negative impact on the environment (Dimitrijević, 2023; Kovačević et al., 2022; Đorđević, et al, 2020). However, despite clear advantages, their implementation is often slowed down due to limited financial resources, lack of technical knowledge and low level of digital literacy among farmers (Kljajić, Paraušić, & Stanković, 2024).

It is precisely in the synergy between CSR practices and technological innovations that the potential for a sustainable transformation of agricultural production lies. From the perspective of stakeholder theory and the Agri-4.0 concept, responsible business practices align the interests of key stakeholders, while digital technologies enable more efficient and sustainable resource management, thereby creating positive synergies in agricultural production. By integrating these approaches, it is possible to improve the efficiency of production, reduce the negative environmental impact and improve the competitiveness of Serbian agriculture on the domestic and international markets (Rajnović, Vujić, & Vujić, 2023).

Accordingly, this paper examines how corporate social responsibility (CSR) and technological innovations affect the transformation of agricultural production in Serbia.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how corporate social responsibility and technological innovation affect the transformation of agricultural production in Serbia, based on an empirical research approach. The study combines theoretical analysis with empirical evidence for the period 2020–2025, providing an updated overview of the current situation in Serbian agriculture.

The paper consists of two parts, theoretical and empirical. Special attention is given to identifying challenges in the implementation of CSR and technological innovations and to evaluating their synergistic effects on agricultural performance, with the aim of formulating practical recommendations for improving agricultural practice and policy in this area.

Literature review

The literature on corporate social responsibility and technological innovation in agriculture emphasizes their increasing importance for sustainability and competitiveness. However, existing studies often analyze these concepts separately, with limited empirical evidence on their combined effects, particularly in transition economies such as Serbia.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to a business approach in which companies, beyond profit generation, assume responsibility for their social and environmental impacts, guided by principles of ethical conduct, sustainability, transparency, and stakeholder engagement (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Jamali et al., 2020). In the agricultural context, CSR is most commonly reflected through practices related to working conditions, community support, environmental management, and product safety (Carroll & Shabana, 2018; Schaltegger et al., 2019).

In the agricultural sector, corporate social responsibility encompasses practices aimed at environmental sustainability and social welfare, including soil conservation, rational use of natural resources, reduction of chemical inputs, and improvement of working conditions for agricultural workers (Martínez-Fernández et al., 2021; López-Gamero et al., 2020; Fernández-Fernández et al., 2022). CSR initiatives also contribute to rural development through investments in local communities, thereby supporting long-term agricultural sustainability and stakeholder trust.

In the agro-industry, CSR has gained particular importance under conditions of climate change and growing food demand, where sustainable resource management becomes essential. Firms increasingly integrate environmental innovations such as renewable energy use, precision agriculture, and sustainable waste management in order to reduce emissions, improve efficiency, and enhance ecosystem resilience (García-Lopera et al., 2021; Tseng et al., 2019; Savić & Marjanović, 2025).

In addition, sustainable and transparent supply chains, covering all stages from the cultivation of raw materials to the distribution of finished products, are becoming key elements of CSR strategies in large food companies. These chains enable better control over environmental and social standards, reducing the risk of unethical practices and fostering consumer confidence (Nguyen et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2020). The integration of digital technologies for supply chain tracking and transparency further contributes to business efficiency and sustainability (Kumar et al., 2021).

In rural areas, corporate social responsibility contributes to social cohesion, local employment, and knowledge diffusion through investments in education, training, and community development, thereby indirectly supporting agricultural productivity and sustainability (Meyer et al., 2022). CSR initiatives aimed at social inclusion, including support for women and youth, as well as partnerships with local institutions and non-governmental organizations, further enhance the resilience and long-term development of agricultural communities (Jain & Jamali, 2016; Gavurová & Csizmadia, 2020; Panić et al., 2025).

In Serbia, the application of corporate social responsibility in agriculture and agro-industry is still in the development phase, but there are significant positive examples that indicate the potential for further progress. Certain family farms actively integrate socially responsible practices, particularly through soil conservation, collaboration with local educational institutions and donations to communities. These practices not only contribute to environmental sustainability, but also strengthen the connection between agriculture and local communities, which is crucial for the development of rural areas. (Rajnović et al., 2023)

CSR in the Serbian food industry most often focuses on environmental aspects of business, such as improving energy efficiency, using renewable energy sources and responsible management of packaging waste. (Berber et al., 2021; Bučalina Matic et al., 2024; Žikić et al., 2024). Such initiatives not only reduce the negative impact of industry on the environment, but also improve the reputation of companies with consumers and investors.

In addition, larger organizations in Serbia, especially those operating on the international market, are increasingly integrating CSR policies that include both social and environmental dimensions, aligning with global sustainability standards. These initiatives contribute to better competitiveness of the Serbian agricultural sector and the creation of long-term values for all interested parties. (Aleksić, et al., 2024)

Although previous studies provide valuable insights into CSR practices and technological innovations in agriculture, there is a lack of recent empirical research that jointly examines their synergistic effects on agricultural performance, especially in the Serbian context. Most existing research focuses either on large agribusinesses or on technological adoption in isolation, without sufficiently addressing how responsible business practices and digitalization interact at the farm and company level. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing an updated empirical analysis for the period 2020–2025 and by evaluating the combined impact of CSR and technological innovation on the transformation of agricultural production in Serbia.

Materials and methods

This study is based on quantitative empirical research, supported by a descriptive and analytical approach. The research was conducted in the Republic of Serbia during the period January–March 2025. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, specifically designed to examine the level of implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices and technological innovations in agricultural production. The sample consisted of 100 respondents, including owners of agricultural holdings and managers of agri-food companies of different sizes. These respondents were selected due to their direct involvement in decision-making processes and their knowledge of business performance, CSR activities, and technological investments.

The observed time horizon covered the period 2020–2025, enabling an analysis of trends in CSR implementation and technological innovation adoption.

CSR was measured through indicators related to innovation and product safety, support to local communities, investment in working conditions, and environmental management. Technological innovation was assessed through investments in digital technologies, automation, precision agriculture, and modern production systems. All variables were measured using categorical and percentage-based indicators, based on respondents' self-reported data.

The collected data were processed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequency analysis and percentage distribution. In order to examine the relationship between CSR practices and agricultural performance, as well as between technological innovation and production efficiency, correlation analysis was applied. The strength and direction of relationships between variables were assessed using linear correlation coefficients. To ensure data reliability, the questionnaire was pre-tested, applied consistently across all respondents, and the collected data were checked for completeness and logical consistency prior to analysis. All statistical analyses and graphical presentations were performed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS statistical software.

It is important to emphasize that the research has certain limitations. Primarily, the results depend on the honesty and accuracy of the respondents' answers, and there is a possibility that some answers are biased or incomplete due to subjective experience or the desire to present themselves in a more positive light.

Despite these limitations, the collected data provide significant insights into the current state and challenges related to the implementation of CSR and technological innovation in agriculture, which contributes to a better understanding of the factors influencing the transformation of the sector.

Research hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the application of corporate social responsibility and success in agricultural production.

H2: Technological innovations have a positive effect on the efficiency of agricultural production.

H3: The combination of CSR and technological innovation contributes to a greater transformation of agriculture than their individual application.

H4: There are obstacles that affect the implementation of CSR and technological innovations in agriculture.

Results with Discussion

The research was followed by data processing, which was presented through tabular and graphic displays. The first table shows the representation of corporate social responsibility in farms and agri-food companies in the last five years, in the period from 2020 to 2025. What percentage of surveyed farms and agri-food companies answered YES according to various parameters of CSR in the past five years can be seen in the tabular presentation, and after that, in the graphic presentation.

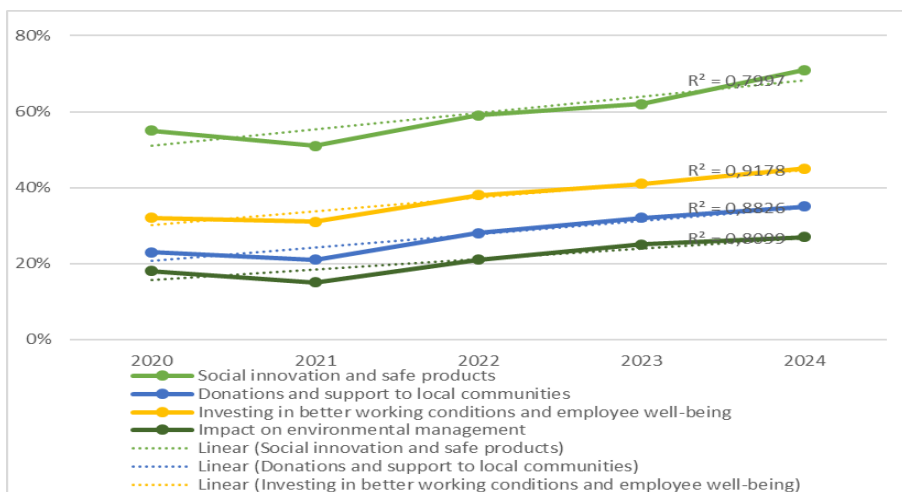
Table 1. Presentation of corporate social responsibility in farms and agri-food companies from 2020-2025

Year	Innovation and safe products	Donations and support to local communities	Investment in better working conditions and the welfare of workers	Impact on environmental management
2020	58%	21%	32%	15%
2021	51%	25%	35%	18%
2022	59%	28%	38%	21%
2023	62%	32%	41%	25%
2024	71%	35%	45%	27%

Source: author’s own account

We can see that a large number of surveyed farms and agri-food companies increase innovation and work on safe products year after year, from 58% who answered yes for 2020, to 71% who answered yes for 2024. Giving donations and supporting local communities is increasing year by year, although these are not high percentages and go up to 35% of respondents who answered affirmatively for the year 2024. There is also a noticeable trend of increasing investment in better working conditions for workers, up to 45% of respondents answered affirmatively for the year 2024, as well as an increasing concern for the environment from year to year, which goes up to 27% of affirmative answers for the year 2024. These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that the gradual adoption of CSR practices in agriculture is primarily driven by innovation-related activities, while social and environmental dimensions develop more slowly (Berber et al., 2021; Aleksić et al., 2024). Similar trends have been observed in other transition economies, where CSR implementation is often incremental and constrained by limited financial and human resources.

Figure 1. Graphic representation of CSR in farms and agro-food companies in the last five years from 2020-2025

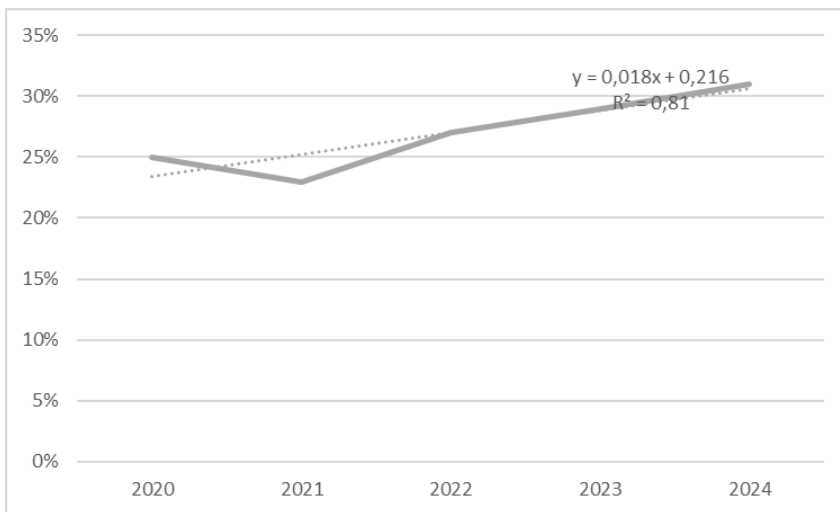


Source: author’s own account

In Figure 1, we see that a high coefficient in the range from 0.7997 to 0.9178 indicates a very strong positive linear connection between various parameters of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and their implementation in Serbian agriculture during the period from 2020 to 2025.

Although there is growing awareness among farmers and agro-food companies in Serbia of the importance of implementing the principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR), there are significant obstacles in their implementation. The key factors that slow down the wider implementation of CSR practices are limited resources and lack of education. Although there is evident progress in understanding the importance of CSR, many farmers and companies face challenges in integrating sustainable practices due to a lack of capacity and professional knowledge. (Kljajić, et al., 2024; Žikić et al., 2022; Dašić et al., 2024)

Figure 2. Investments in technological innovations



Source: author's own account

Figure 2 shows a linear representation of investment in technological innovation over the last five years, from 2020 to 2025. It can be seen that the percentage of farms and agri-food companies that invest in technological innovations is increasing year by year. In 2024, 31% of respondents answered that they invested in technological innovations, it is not a large percentage compared to the total number of respondents, but it is a good indicator that it is increasing from year to year. The share of companies investing in technological innovation is continuously growing (except for a slight decline in 2021), which indicates increasing awareness and capacity for modernization in the sector. The increasing investment in technological innovation supports earlier findings that digitalization is gradually becoming a key driver of productivity and sustainability in agriculture, although adoption rates remain moderate (Kljajić et al., 2024; Gyamfi et al., 2024). Compared to studies conducted in more developed agricultural systems, the

observed level of investment in Serbia remains relatively low, highlighting structural and financial constraints.

Technological innovation, digital transformation, including technologies such as IT, artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT) and big data analytics are key to advancing green innovation within corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies. An empirical study conducted in China showed that digitalization directly increases the ability for green innovation, with CSR functioning as a catalyst for that process (Zhang, Liu & Cao, 2023). Technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing and big data analytics enable the reorganization of business models and process paradigms towards green and low-carbon development (Zhang et al., 2023).

In the agricultural sphere, the concept of “Agriculture 4.0” integrates technologies such as precision agriculture, IoT sensors, drones and big data analytics to optimize the use of resources and increase sustainability (Gyamfi et al., 2024; Rejeb et al., 2023).

Sensor data and real-time analytics enable micro-level interventions: precise distribution of water and fertilizers according to actual soil needs, early detection of pests and plant conditions before damage occurs (Cihan, 2023; Malešević et al., 2024)

Table 2. Comparative analysis of CSR in Serbia

Element	Farms	Agri-food companies
Formal CSR	They are practically non-existent: no strategy, no reports, no certificates	Clearly structured: strategic programs, reporting
Education and digital support	Using the e-Agrar system	They provide training through foundations, partnerships with PSSS
Sustainable practices	Indirect (saving water and inputs), motivated by profit, not publicly declared	Active ecological initiatives, regenerative agriculture, certificates
Community projects/ humanitarian work	Rare, informal donor gestures - mostly individual	Regular donations (food, equipment), children’s playgrounds, contribution during the pandemic
Transparency and recognition	Without public transparency and evaluation	Participation in the CSR index, awards (“Sustainability Champion”), public recognition

Source: author’s own account

Table 2 shows a comparison between farms and agri-food companies by various elements based on the conducted research.

Conclusions

This paper confirms that the synergy between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and technological innovation represents a critical strategy for the transformation of agricultural production. The empirical results indicate a strong positive relationship

between CSR activities and production performance, as well as a growing level of investment in technological innovation, suggesting an increasing orientation of the agricultural sector toward digitalization and environmental sustainability.

Digital technologies such as sensors, drones, IoT systems, and digital platforms enable more precise resource management, environmental monitoring, and transparency in agricultural production. In this way, technological innovation operationalizes CSR principles by transforming responsible business practices into measurable and evidence-based outcomes related to efficiency, environmental protection, and productivity. However, despite positive trends, the overall level of technological adoption remains moderate, indicating the presence of structural, financial, and knowledge-related barriers.

The results further show significant differences between agri-food companies and agricultural holdings in the implementation of CSR practices. Agri-food companies tend to adopt a more structured, transparent, and strategic approach to CSR, with greater emphasis on education, environmental initiatives, donations, and public recognition. In contrast, agricultural holdings more frequently apply informal and less visible CSR practices, primarily oriented toward short-term operational and profit-related benefits. These differences highlight the need for targeted education, advisory support, and institutional assistance for smaller farms, as well as the importance of strengthening partnerships between farms and agri-food companies to facilitate knowledge transfer and broader CSR adoption.

From a practical and policy perspective, the findings suggest that agricultural development strategies should place stronger emphasis on integrated CSR–technology programs. Financial incentives, training initiatives, and advisory services aimed at improving digital skills and access to innovative technologies—particularly for small and medium-sized farms—are essential. Institutional support mechanisms, including national subsidy schemes and rural development programs, could play a key role in reducing adoption barriers and promoting sustainable and competitive agricultural production.

This study has certain limitations. The findings rely on respondents' self-assessment, which may introduce subjective bias, while the relatively small sample size and the focus on Serbian agriculture limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, apply longitudinal research designs, and use more advanced statistical methods to further examine causal relationships between CSR, technological innovation, and agricultural performance, as well as to assess the long-term effects of their combined implementation.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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