

Issues and Priorities in CSR Initiatives: Context and Methodological Discourse

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Abstract

To draw the methodological and research issues that exist in CSR arena and generates ideas for moving forward with CSR initiatives as an inter-disciplinary approach to improve the relevance of CSR in totality. This article adopted phenomenological approach in addressing strengths and weakness of the CSR initiatives to date with their wide-range of contextual understanding and empirical detail, with reference to eastern societies. This itself reflects a very little work which has been done in the 'east'; this paper is inductive and explorative one rather. Starting from the changing concept of CSR and imperialism to discourse of CSR effects and characteristics how practitioner in eastern societies and their continued adoption of Western modelling required to be re-visited in the context of methodological content. However, means and routes of CSR are built on 'west' initiatives and their perceptions of the tensions and contradictions that seek to oblige the moral guidelines required contextual changes in the researchers' perspectives. The importance of linking both Eastern and Western contexts of research and practice, and build opportunities for providing more effective linkages between researchers and research users is the need of the hour. The present study provides a starting-point for advance research in the CSR arena with the outlook of changing social responsibility in fulfilling its corporate governance and CSR mission. This calls for redefinitions and reassessment of CSR theories and models while looking at changing the nature of the relationship and responsibilities of the corporate. This article advocates for a strong contextual and research base for changed social responsibility beyond a trade-off between production and reward, and shall be looked into beyond philanthropy. This is a notable and promising side-effect of the phenomenological approach through exploratory research design, at least from a CSR point of view.

Keywords

Corporate Social Responsibility, Regulation, Corporate Governance, Methodological Issues, Imperialism

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives have an extensive and magnificent record across the globe. The debate over CSR and its role in the era of liberalization continues, which are indistinguishable. However, it is essential to know how CSR is different from earlier self initiatives of corporate and their connection with the subsidies and tax exemptions received by the corporate. As Ravichandran (2006a; 2006b) puts, this is not only questioning the social welfarism philosophy but also sharpening the regulatory mechanisms to deal with it. Hence, this paper addresses the three themes: first, it reflects on the

benefits and mischief of the CSR initiatives up till now with their widespread contextual understanding and empirical detail. Second, it briefly sketches methodological issues in economic and governance studies, linking this with both the growth of and resistance to neoliberal policy agenda. Third, this paper also generates ideas for moving forward with the CSR initiatives, both theory and inter-disciplinary approach to improve the relevance of CSR. Themes included in the paper embrace the need for trans-disciplinary research, linking both Eastern and Western contexts, and the need to build opportunities for providing more effective relationships between researchers and research 'users' particularly in the developing countries.

2. The Insight into CSR Practice and Discourse

This section offers insights into CSR practice and highlights necessitate a change. CSR is not a charity or administering the social needs where government failed. Currently, CSR has window-dressing approach which is mostly technical (Ravichandran, 2012). However, it aims to provide solutions to socio-economic and environmental issues. As CSR continues to expand in scope and scale in developed economies, its spread has increased phenomenally.

The concept of CSR is not new, though the term may be. Philosophers from pre-Christian era in the West and Philosophers like Kautilya from East preached and promoted ethical principles while doing business (Carroll, 1999). The idea of 'changing responsibility' supported by all religions in the world and 'social responsibility' been intertwined it with their religious laws. Many religious organizations have taken the action by setting up trusts for the poor, the disadvantaged and community development a whole. The role of corporate, on the contrary, generally noted in terms of creating wealth and profitability (Frank Abrams, 1951). However, as a result of globalization and serious ecological issues, the role of corporate has been systematically altered, while the stakeholders (employees, community, shareholders) are redefining the role of corporate beyond economic performance and also monitoring the corporate's roles that are ethically and socially relevant. As a result, the economic performance has been visionised with social dimensions.

Under this notion, as Hemingway (2002) stated, the family run business, during the 1930-50s, managed their business entities as a trust held organization in the interest of society and contributed towards socio-economic development. Subsequently, the world embraced mixed and socialist economy during the 1950-70s, the ownership and legal requirements decided corporate roles. As a result, the term CSR that is come into exist. This implied that the corporate have to obey the law and invest part of their profit in developmental projects and play a vital role in improving socio-economic conditions of the people in need (Ravichandran, 2006c). This assumed corporate to follow triple-bottom line approach with focus on governance. This is because corporate have gradually engaged in many [social] actions, which have been traditionally the responsibility of the government, but due to latter's capacity, business have taken the lead. Because of the fact that term CSR is erroneously equated with either corporate philanthropy or simply compliance with law.

Kotler and Lee defined CSR as "a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources". In simple words, CSR is the continuing commitment by business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and the society at large. It is essentially about making a visible difference in people's lives and livelihoods and meeting the society's needs and aspirations. For example, Paul Hohnen and Jason Potts (2007)

defining CSR as "the way firms integrate social, economic, and environmental concerns into their values, culture, decision-making, strategy and operations in a transparent and accountable manner and thereby establish better practices within the firm, create wealth, and improve society". Thus, it tackles fundamental issues of social, economic and environmental issues of the society through appropriate managerial practices. On the contrary, the critics state that CSR cannot continue to be driven with social agendas by external values (stakeholders), and there exists a real need to gauge systematically the added value and impacts of CSR interventions from the perspectives of local stakeholders. Nonetheless, there has been a rapid growth in the numbers of CSRs in the past decade, both in the 'west', where CSR are concerned with social, economic and environmental issues, and in the countries of 'the east', where CSRs have been identified as potential 'partners' for making difference in people's lives, livelihoods and building local capacity. As CSR continues to expand, the academician face the challenge of compiling sophisticated and insightful research that presents alternative perspectives and a critical approach, for enhancing the pact of CSR initiatives (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2001). At the same time, 'the east' continue to follow the 'west' assumptions about CSR and its practices require more careful scrutiny, particularly in view of the change across the emerging economies.

But, the real potential of CSR to deliver on this aspiration require constant assessment and monitoring, taking into consideration local community voices and perspectives. Although, international agencies and multinational companies have had the opportunity to express their views on the potential of CSR, the voices of local communities are yet to have their share as they should logically be at the heart of effective change management intervention (Ravichandran, 2007a). However, methods and measures of CSR are based on 'west' initiatives and their perceptions of the tensions and contradictions that seek to impose the ethical guidelines. This reflects a very little work which has been done in the 'east'; this paper is inductive and explorative one rather.

3. Managing Imperialism

Mostly western based CSR ideologies have been adopted by the 'eastern' corporate, and they have moved beyond the child labour issue to focus on a wider range of concerns i.e., workplace safety, freedom of association and the like. Efforts have thus gone into improve reputation, reduce their operational costs, and secure their market position through adapting social and environmental responsibilities. Due to the strong 'west' orientation, the local voices and their interests are ignored. This has reflected in the eastern approach to its understanding. That is, CSR is seen as a strategy to improve the business and create wealth. For example, Section 135, Companies Act 2013, India noted companies "...integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations...", and cited that "on compulsory basis". Now,

code of conduct in place and many regulatory imposing diverse measures on corporate. That is, corporate consented to share their profits, but they were also concerned that they were not given adequate representation in having say in CSR initiatives and focusing on which may not allow to board local socio-cultural conditions and sensitivities into account. As a result of having little or no local input in determining and implementing CSR initiatives, the success and progress, and sustenance remained questionable. In other words, India moving from ‘cosmetic’ approach to ‘obligatory’ basis. The main challenge here is “going beyond compliance” with existing legislation to facilitate the progress of the stakeholders in terms of economic principles, improve social values and protect environment (Ravichandran, 2007b). This act does not mean companies in the emerging economies, like India, do not adopt any kind of social responsibility for their workers and their stakeholders /shareholders. But, state of emerging economies mapped social priorities that required to be followed by the corporate. Nonetheless, many corporate and companies in the emerging world serve the society silently and practice hushed CSR without publicity or any return social investment.

This reflects that post-colonial theories emanates in the developing world from the adaptation of CSR and its development, and ongoing effects of western colonization (Ashcroft et al. 1989). However, a variety of social perspectives from Marxism to post-structuralism (Westwood, 2006) leading to insensitivity to the perceptions of developing economies are required to examine the methodological inputs especially explaining the tendency in the adaptation from colonial times to western universalism. On the other hand, an unequal exchange between west and east are increasingly occurring, which may constitute an important element of exploitation.

The overarching theme that emerged out in my details while sketching out the imperialism, which require a set of relations whereby ‘east’ can enrich itself by imposing its local will and the deployment of socio-cultural power. This might change the concept of CSR perception at local and may push into unique enquiries in the CSR research literature. At the same time, involving local manufacturers, suppliers, exporters and vendors on board in the CSR initiatives, at the moment it is not will lead to counter-discourse of CSR imperialism – which is not foreseen at this juncture a shift for research paradigm.

3.1. The Rise of CSR as a Research Topic: Changed Social Responsibility

The concept was noted as early in 1940s by ‘Engine Charlie’, an American businessman and CEO of General Motors that it is “corporate executives’ responsibilities” extended beyond their shareholders. In 1951, Frank Abrams, Chairman of Standard Oil of New Jersey, in a public address stated that, “the job of management is to maintain an equitable and working balance among the claims of the various directly interested groups...stockholders, employees, customers, and the public at large”. In 1953, Bowen, however, tossed the term CSR with reference to business obligations to pursue policies and its related decision that values society needs and demand. With the passage of time, the word “society” has been replaced with “stakeholders” of an organisation. Dahl (1972: 18) stated “...every large corporation should be thought of as a social enterprise; that is an entity whose existence and decisions can be justified in so far as they serve public or social purposes”. In other words, CSR is nothing but organisational benevolence (Victor and Cullen, 1988: 104).

World Bank Institute (2001) refers “CSR as a collection of policies and practices linked to relationship with key stakeholders, values, compliance with legal requirements, and respect for people, communities and the environment”. Bank’s thinking based on the capabilities of corporate and limited competency of states to focus on stakeholders’ demand. Bank envisioned that the role of government is to secure the conditions in which markets could operate across a range of socio-economic life. Whereas EU Commission (2002) defines, “CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis”.

For instance, government of India established Corporate Commission of India (CCI) in 2011 to frame guidelines for allocating funding, improving governance and managing the key socio-economic areas. CCI did not ground theories and literature to set out guidelines for a range of prescriptions around new sets of development policy – i.e., an development could be anticipated.

The below Table suggests the definition of CSR has been changed over the period of time. The Western researchers incorporate environmental safety as a prime focus where as in the East, the focus is on fulfilling primary and basic needs. In the East, focusing is on social transformation, capacity building and knowledge development.

Table 1. Definitional Changes of CSR Orientation.

Author (Year)	CSR orientation
Bowen (1953)	“It refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those politics, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of actions which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of society”
Davis (1973)	“The firm’s considerations of, and response to, issues beyond the narrow economic, technical, and legal requirements of the firm to accomplish social [and environmental] benefits along with the traditional economic gains which the firm seeks.”
Ackerman and Bauer (1976)	“Corporate Social Responsiveness...”
Carroll (1979)	“Business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organization at a

Author (Year)	CSR orientation
Archie Carroll (1999)	given point in time..." "CSR is a multi-layered concept that can be differentiated into four interrelated aspects – economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. These different responsibilities as consecutive layers within a pyramid, such that "true" social responsibility requires the meeting of all four levels consecutively."
Mosley et. Al. (1996)	"Corporate social responsibility refers to managements' obligation to set policies, make decisions and follow courses of action beyond the requirements of the law that are desirable in terms of the values and objectives of society."
Balabanis, Phillips and Lyall (1998)	"in the modern commercial area, companies and their managers are subjected to well publicised pressure to play an increasingly active role in [the welfare of] society."
Maclagan (1998)	"Corporate social responsibility may be viewed as a process in which managers take responsibility for identifying and accommodating the interests of those affected by the organization's actions."
Baker (2001)	"CSR is not philanthropy and it must be more than just obeying the law."
Business for Social Responsibility (2002)	"CSR is defined as operating a business in a manner that meets or exceeds the ethical, legal, commercial and public expectations that society has of business."
The European Union (2015)	"CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a <i>voluntary</i> basis."
McWilliams and Siegel (2001)	CSR may be defined as actions on the part of a firm that appear to advance the promotion of some social good beyond the immediate interests of the firm/shareholders and beyond legal requirements. That is, "CSR activities of companies are those that exceed compliance with respect to, e.g., environmental or social regulations, in order to create the perception or reality that these firms are advancing a social goal..."
Aaronson (2003)	"Business decision making linked to ethical values, compliance with legal requirements, and respect for people, communities, and the environment around the world".
Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee (2005)	"CSR is a commitment to improve community well being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources"
Mallen Baker (2004)	"CSR is a way companies manage the business processes to produce an overall positive impact on society."
O Falck, and S Hebllich (2007)	"CSR is regarded as voluntary corporate commitment to exceed the explicit and implicit obligations imposed on a company by society's expectations of conventional corporate behaviour. Hence, CSR is a way of promoting social trends in order to enhance society's basic order, which we define as consisting of obligations that cover both the legal framework and social conventions."
European Commission (2002)	"Corporate social responsibility is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis."
World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2015)	"Corporate Social Responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large".

Hence, the CSR initiatives are the core of the corporate social mission and are defined as the corporate commitment to economic, environmental and social responsibility towards the community. Moreover, this adapted and/or administered definition in the emerging economies and the existing CSR literature is both normative and weak. Overall, both CSR initiatives and CSR research initiatives in the developing world lacks conceptual clarity, which would make the discussion and comparison difficult.

3.2. CSR Research: A Contemporary Phenomenon

A wide range of reports and findings about CSR are available in various forms. A phenomenological approach to qualitative research is developed in CSR with socio-psycho-environmental perspectives. Though many academic institutions have specialized research cell /unit on CSR, but failed to examine postcolonial theory and dependency theory while ignored to assess the ongoing 'west' methods of exploitation. Moreover, research associations with non-governmental organizations and voluntary organization are strengthening the CSR initiatives at the grass-root level. They encouraged to implement their 'west' perspectives le(a)d unsuccessful in determining the antecedents and consequences of 'code of conduct' (Ravichandran, 2007c).

Despite all this popular interest or current state of CSR research, and the growth of research on CSR and its

relational issues during the past decade, my argument is that the overall state of our knowledge remains somewhat under-developed. One reason is that serious 'academic' research on CSR themes has been comparatively infrequent, with much of the published output in this field written either by reflective practitioners or by engaged academics wearing an 'activist hat'. While this may offer many useful insights, as Ravichandran (2012) puts, such work rarely adds up to a comprehensive analysis, theory or the application of more rigorous methodologies. Second, the studies that have attempted did only to understand local perceptions of what might have/be done for the welfare of stakeholders/shareholders. Third, is that while data on many aspects of CSR issues often exists as part of the considerable 'grey' literature produced by CSR Foundations, and NGOs themselves in the form of policy statements and evaluation reports, which have been mostly not accessed or analysed by experts. Fourth, studying west-ideological intrusion in the emerging economies is still largely absent, including past literature whatever we have.

On the one hand, [i] the CSR research field has become fragmented by the use of a variety of confusing terminologies which restrict exchange and learning among researchers; [ii] a lack of cross-disciplinary dialogue and interdisciplinary work (Lewis, 2005); [iii] low levels of theory development compared to research on the government and social sectors (Lewis and Ravichandran, 2008); [iv] poor use of research

techniques instead of finding out “how human beings make sense of experience” (Schutz, 1977) and analyse “...how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it” (Patton, 1990, p-104) rather and [v] complex organizational dynamics and behaviour in CSR initiatives.

On the other hand, [a] divergent case studies from social policy researchers and development list, yet again falling alternatives and insights; [b] predominantly pretty narrow, meso-level organisational case studies that are often anecdotal in nature or with relatively limited value in making decision; [c] concern overscholastic and functional enquires among experts perhaps undermined both quality and applicability; and, [d] low levels of research capacity in relation to CSR themes in many parts of the world - particularly in ‘the east’ - which has impeded both local, national and international research collaboration.

As a result of these problems, criticisms of the research literature on CSR initiatives have begun to emerge within the field of management, environmental and development studies. There are perhaps six main issues. First, a much of the work on CSR has been primarily driven by normative agendas, and written by people with sufficient distance from their subject of research. Second, there has been a strong ideological emphasis to much of the work on CSR initiatives, such as the strong tendencies for researchers to be either ‘for’ or ‘against’ CSR implementation or governance, or the influence of managerialism in writings about CSR initiatives or foundations. Third, a set of issues centre on the idealism of many of those writings about CSR initiatives and its relational governance, and the result that expectations have been projected onto CSR that most are by definition unable to live up to. Fourth, work on CSR has suffered from its perceived location (on the applied side) within wider and persisting debates within management, environmental and development studies about ‘applied’ versus ‘pure’ research. Fifth, regulations, compliance and activists area lack of relevance to their practical needs of some academic work, and insufficient attention to process which promote research-practice partnerships. Sixth, by contrast, academics point to the theoretical and empirical weaknesses of research on this theme, and the difficulties of obtaining ‘access’ to organisational settings which will allow more objective research on CSR initiatives and its governance issues.

With growing competition, the corporate are facing pressures in term of reducing operational and production costs, and assuming greater risks, though there exists a tension between compliance and normative (customer based) quality standards. Khan and Lund (2011, p-85) note, “... it would be interesting new avenue in CSR and development research to explore whether such anticolonial discourses are indeed present, and perhaps even widespread” in the developing countries.

4. Conclusion: CSR Research Challenge and the Future

In sum, what emerged from this paper that two different stakeholders namely, activists and beneficiaries viewed either facilitating or opposing the CSR's commitment to economic, environmental and social sustainability. Management is often expected to defend the status quo but CSR aims favouring local stakeholders. Moreover, quantitatively there is a deeper concern for government that benefits should reach the right beneficiaries as intended while qualitatively CSR initiatives touch the issues of socio-economic development, but primarily on the basic amenities. Thus, there is a clear distinction between stakeholders who support or the rupture the CSR initiatives. There is a sharp distinction between those who are satisfied with the CSR mission and those who are not. Whether the change occurred and how it processed depends on one's perspective and interests. Would this change process be capable of breaking the status quo that would distinguish CSR's initiatives from being another philanthropic movement? Due to this, the CSR has emerged as a theoretically exciting and policy relevant research on CSR, over and above to those detailed in this paper, issues of governance and citizenship, the role CSR in restructuring the relationship and accountability between organized beneficiaries and government, and activists and business. In addition, there is a link with subject of work and corporate: the wide range of CSR initiatives forms, and the increasing ways in which the CSR sector shapes and restructures the experience of work – both through formal employment and through forms of voluntarism.

A clearly outlined agenda for CSR research, as Lewis and Ravichandran outlined for NPO sectors, is important because: (a) is deeply ingrained in the culture of the organization; (b) despite its centrality to current policy agendas, existing research is mostly fragmented and parochial, and needs building upon, more systematically; (c) high quality, user-focused research is still needed since much previous research in this field was funded from ‘non-objective’ sources; (d) there are excellent opportunities for research practice and linkages, East and West collaboration and trans-disciplinary work; (e) there is a strong potential for CSR research to act as an entry point into wider global themes.

In the developing economies perspective of a stakeholder approach to CSR is thus relevant to a range of public action as a research issue means that it is a field of study that is open to all social science disciplines. However, there has been little inter-disciplinary work in the field to date, which puts forward challenges for future research to build upon and broaden existing work within social science disciplines in a balanced way. The themes may include development studies, social policy, psychology, political science, sociology, federal studies and economics.

Finally, CSR should not be conceived in terms of a trade-off between production and reward, and shall be looked into beyond philanthropy. The researchers have to reconstruct a neutral language to enhance their permeation to feed

effectively into existing policy debates and contribute to the knowledge wisdom.

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