

“Talking the CSR Walk—Tower of Babel? or Strategic Vision?”

Frank den Hond, Frank G. A. de Bakker, Peter Neergaard (eds.). *Managing Corporate Social Responsibility in Action: Talking, Doing, Measuring*
(Aldershot, Hamps., UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007)

A Review by William C. Frederick, July 2007

The authors of this book seek the symbolic and operational meanings of Corporate Social Responsibility. They find it in some surprising places: the columns of London’s *Financial Times*, the self-seeking entrepreneurship of CSR consultants, the annual reports of publicly-held companies, the sly attempts of some companies to be seen as doing good while doing well, the rankings doled out by social rating agencies, and the frustrating attempts of global corporations to temper fierce market competition with culturally-diverse stakeholder demands.

They also discover—perhaps the book’s major contribution—a very large gap between a harmonious CSR rhetoric and a practice-oriented CSR dissonance. CSR “talk” doesn’t seem to match the CSR “walk”. The dissonance is less a function of institutional hypocrisy than of the multiform ways that CSR is understood and, in good faith, put into practice.

The editors have arranged the chapters in three parts, plus a conclusion:

- **TALKING: CSR in Discourse.**
- **DOING: CSR in Praxis.**
- **MEASURING: CSR in Scales.**

The basic theme of **TALKING** is that CSR has acquired a generalized homogenous meaning associated with the onset of globalization during the 1990s. The rise in CSR *discourse* that began in the late 1980s has been fed by increased media attention to CSR issues, by a surging supply of CSR consultants eager to sell their services to businesses, by the relative decline of national government-supported social welfare programs and the resultant larger social burden placed on private global enterprises by stakeholder demands, and by CSR standards set by global rating agencies. The final result, according to the editors, has been a homogenized meaning of CSR that blends the social and the economic: “The *noblesse oblige* argument that social responsibilities of firms should be commensurate to their social power . . . is seamlessly interwoven with the firm’s prime responsibility of making money . . .” Hence, a *rhetorical* harmony about CSR’s meaning and importance can be observed.

But the **DOING** phase of CSR is another story. Here, idiosyncrasy rules, and context is everything. What is labeled CSR by one company differs from another company’s CSR initiatives. Costs, benefits, stakeholders, national cultures, industry

characteristics (not to speak of varying products and services, not mentioned by the authors), chronological stage of development, employee attitudes—all of these add a diversity of meaning and bring forth varying strategies aimed at attaining CSR standing. What began as broad agreement about CSR's essential meaning now appears as heterogeneous specificity. Rhetorical harmony becomes operational diversity.

Into this drama, enter **MEASURING**. Here, the book's message blurs somewhat. The editors believe that measurement can bridge the divide between **TALKING** and **DOING**, or at least provides “a connection between these two levels”. Social rating agencies, as well as companies themselves, need to provide stakeholders with clear evidence of CSR activities, and to compare one firm's performance with another's. Rankings based upon social performance benchmarks are one way to accomplish this goal. A “CSR reporting [and measuring] industry” therefore is consciously devoted to linking CSR aspiration with CSR performance. The editors ultimately rely upon a form of social constructionism to argue that CSR is given only a relative meaning revealed by measuring its effect at any given time or place—and that “social responsibility is a subjective if not political concept”.

To be quite honest, this is a disturbing book. Its collective authorship imply—and some of them declare outright—that CSR has no unified substantive meaning. Even more upsetting is that CSR may, and does, mean anything its promoters, detractors, and/or corporate adopters wish it to mean. So slippery is the concept that measurement and auditing tools fail to elicit or clarify a company's true CSR commitment or status. The plight of global corporations is even worse, for they conduct business in multiple, culturally diverse markets where tradition and vested local interests can, and at times do, make a mockery of the entire notion of socially responsible decisions and strategies. Neither human rights, environmental damage, stakeholder demands, philanthropic initiatives, philosophic principle, nor normative claims do, or can, constitute a present basis for clarifying the CSR role and function of today's business firms, except—contrariwise—to possibly serve as a patchwork of inconsistent, contradictory guides for attaining the dubious distinction of seeming to offer something desirable that they in fact do not deliver. I am pleased to report, however, that having delivered this sobering message, the authors appear to be as distressed about the situation as I and other long-time viewers of the CSR scene are likely to be.

These striking perspectives arise predominantly from scholars posted at European universities—Holland (2), Denmark (3), Sweden (5), Norway (1), Italy (1), France (3), United Kingdom (1)—plus a representative each from Australia, Canada, and the United States. The book's primary method is a form of discourse analysis that searches for the imputed meaning(s) given to CSR concepts and activities by the principal participants and observers. This approach places the contents at one remove from the actual behavioral context in which CSR is pursued (or not) by firms, although one aim of the editors is to pose questions about managing CSR “in action”, as the title asserts. The resulting gap between rhetoric and action means that the book is less about the latter than the former—and thus partly accounts for the rather gloomy prospect that CSR is presented as having

little chance of being understood or followed as a common business behavior throughout global markets.

Two offsetting views are worth brief mention. Reliance on measurement as the way to reconcile CSR intention and action, as the authors favor, is risky. A recent *Wall Street Journal* report “Finding the Best Measure of ‘Corporate Citizenship’” describes three different social rating systems—Ethisphere, GovernanceMetrics International, and Audit Integrity, Inc.—as offering measures of corporate governance and citizenship that vary wildly from each other, making it hard to tell the “good guys” from the “bad guys”. The problem is not so much an absence of knowing what CSR is as the way different measures are applied—and by rating agencies with a vested interest in their own measuring standards.

Is there agreement about CSR’s substantive function beyond mere measurement and beyond the obvious disparity in CSR practice revealed by the authors of this book? Some of the evidence pointing toward an affirmative answer is found in several of the other books—most also by European authors—reviewed elsewhere on this website. They speak of the array of transnational codes of conduct, environmental compacts, human rights protections, supply chain safeguards, and—perhaps as important as anything—a top-level CSR commitment from many of the world’s leading corporations. Do these normative instruments, along with the corporate commitments and operational compliance they induce add up to a single, unified, global concept of CSR? Probably not. But they suggest a movement in that direction which goes well beyond this book’s contention that CSR is a cause without a secure operational home.