

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: OVERVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Predicated on the fundamental methodological roles of conceptual and theoretical frameworks, this paper provides a general and broader overview of the concepts and theories relevant to the study of various aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR). This is with a view to simplify novice researchers' effort in articulating, structuring, defining and systematically construing and locating their CSR research within a particular conceptual and theoretical framework. The paper argues that some conceptual and theoretical frameworks, in whatever form(s) they are presented, are critical components of any meaningful research without which a research exercise would only be a shadow of itself bereft of any meaningful contribution to knowledge. There are no best conceptual and theoretical frameworks out there for all kind of research on CSR. However, each conceptual and theoretical framework to be applied in the study of CSR must contain all the necessary variables and terms that could help to address research questions, hypotheses and objectives. Any departure from this would be futile effort.

Keywords: CSR, Classical, Stakeholder, Legitimacy, Shareholder, Social contract, Instrumental strategy

Introduction

Research is a fundamental enterprise in knowledge generation and in knowing and exploring the world. This is why it is a professional endeavor that ought to be guided by certain universally acceptable procedures, methods and processes. In the social and management sciences, in particular, the social phenomenon of research is always complex and would therefore, often requires complex examinations and explanations. For example, Imenda (2014: 185) observes that:

It is not controversial to state that three people coming from different walks of life, watching the same event, are likely to come with different interpretations of that event. Certainly, depending on "the spectacles" each one of them is "wearing" in viewing the event, they would each have a different "view" of the event. Each person's viewpoint, or point of reference, is his/ her *conceptual or theoretical framework*. In essence, the conceptual or theoretical framework is the soul of every research project. It determines how a given researcher formulates his/her research problem – and how he/she goes about investigating the problem, and what meaning s/he attaches to the data accruing from such an investigation (emphasis added).

The aim of this paper is to clarify the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility within the

underlying assumptions of the role of conceptual framework in research and through this provide a logical overview of dominant theories of corporate social responsibility within the prism and parameters of the role of theories as guiding spectacles in any meaningful research exercise. A theory is like a blueprint, a guide for modeling a structure. A blueprint depicts the elements of a structure and the relation of each element to the other, just as a theory depicts the concepts, which compose it and the relation of concepts with each other." By implication, theoretical framework serves as an expression of knowledge, provides articulate structure of ideas of the research being conducted, direction for the study and systematic view of the phenomenon under investigation (Chinn & Krama, 1999).

Without much troubles, a theoretical framework has certain fundamental features, namely: definitions of terms, concepts and variables; a domain of knowledge applicable to it; a set of relationships among its key variables; and specific predictable claims (Walker, 1998). A concept in research, according to Hornby (2005) requires a definition. This is because meanings and interpretations of concepts are contextualized as they reflect theoretical concerns and ideological taste of the researcher and the phenomenon under investigation. Concepts, therefore, are components of theory, which "convey the abstract ideas within a theory" (Chinn and Kramer, 1999:252). Given this background, the aim of this paper is to offer conceptual and theoretical frameworks that serve these methodological purposes in the study of corporate social responsibility. This is to simplify theoretical understanding for researchers exploring various areas of corporate social responsibility within the context of the relationships between corporate world (business organisations) and societies under which they operate.

The Concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility

The corporate world today is being dominated and overwhelmed by the questions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). On a wide range of issues, business organizations are encouraged to be socially responsible (Welford and Frost, 2006; Engle, 2006). However, in both the corporate and the academic world, there is no consensus regarding how CSR should be defined and conceptualised. Almost every study that examines corporate social responsibility makes reference to the difficulty associated with conceptualising the term. Consequently, it has no universally acceptable definition. It was originally referred to as corporate philanthropy. Corporate social responsibility has evolved to include a broader set of criteria with an increased focus on sustainability. In fact, some go as far as arguing that "we have looked for a definition and basically there isn't one" (Jackson & Hawker, 2001). What perhaps this means is not lack of definitions, but rather one that could be universally applicable. It shows there are numerous definitions, which according to Van Marrewijk (2003) are often biased towards specific interests and, therefore, cannot be applied in other situations and interests. On a general note, CSR has defied a universally acceptable definition (s). The numerous varied definitions are rather conflictual, controversial and even ideologically sentimental.

The confusion surrounding the definition of CSR might potentially be a significant problem. If competing definitions have diverging biases, students are likely to construe CSR differently and thus create divergent results and conclusions. Unfortunately, any attempt to develop an empirically acceptable definition is challenging, because of lack of methodology to verify its empiricism. Interestingly, all definitions would require application through which their logic and/or bias and confusion (Dahlrud, 2008) could be well appreciated. However, despite this difficulty, attempt is made here to briefly review the concept of corporate social responsibility, which would provide the theoretical and empirical for any research on the subject matter. To start with, Corporate Social Responsibility is defined as a firm's commitment operating in an

economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable manner, while recognizing the interest of its stakeholders, including investors, customers, employees, business partners, local communities, the environment and society at large (CBSR, 2005, cited in Gawel, 2006). The Conference Board of Canada (CBC) (2005) defines corporate social responsibility as the overall relationship between the corporation and all of its stakeholders. These include customers, employees, communities, owners, investors, government, suppliers and competitors. Elements of social responsibility include investment in community outreach, employees' relations, creation and maintenance of employment, environmental stewardship and financial performance. Moreover, corporate social responsibility also refers to ethical, legal philanthropic behaviour in the workplace, market and community. Respects for employees, the community and environment are thus central to corporate social responsibility. This is always observed with corporate profitability as the overriding objective. At its best, corporate social responsibility bolsters a corporate status and contributes lasting value to its shareholders as well as to society at large.

Corporate social responsibility comprises three main areas; (i) society; (ii) the environment; and (iii) the economy. A socially responsible company acts in such a way as to address these areas through the development of corporate policies and by obeying the law. A company is responsible for treating its employees well, respecting the communities in which it operates, developing sound corporate governance, ensuring environmental preservation, and supporting philanthropy, human rights, and economic prosperity (CBSR, 2004). CSR is generally concerned with treating firm's stakeholders ethically or in a responsible manner, i.e. treating stakeholders in such a manner that is free from any form of deception and fraud in transaction. The wider aim of social responsibility is to engender higher social standards of living, while improving the profitability of an organisation. Corporate social responsibility is various called: "corporate citizenship", "the ethical corporation", while others use "good corporate governance" or "corporate responsibility" (Joshi & Sama, 2008). By this CSR promotes a vision of business accountability to a wide range of stakeholders and investors. Key areas of concern are environmental protection and the wellbeing of employees, the community and civil society in general. The concept of CSR is underpinned by the idea that corporations can no longer act as isolated economic entities operating away from the larger society. Thus, the concept of CSR is built around the idea that, since corporate organizations operate within the society, they should at least out of their earnings put something good to their society, especially due to the fact that, corporation look up to the society in their quest to get raw materials, labour, and most importantly market. Hence mutually cordial relationship is desirable between the corporate world and the society.

The Russian Managers' Association (RMA, 2006) stressed that Corporate Social Responsibility represents the philosophy of conduct and a concept of doing business being applied by business communities, companies and individual businessmen for sustainable development and preservation of resources for future generations. CSR is operating, therefore, based on the following principles: (i) providing quality products and services to consumers; (ii) creating decent jobs, (iii) investing in development of production and human resources; (iv) strict compliance with laws, whether tax, labour, environmental or otherwise; (v) integrity and reciprocity in relationships with all stakeholders; (vi) doing business efficiently to create economic value added and improve national competitiveness for the benefit of shareholders and the society; (vii) integrating public expectations and generally accepted ethics into business practice; (viii) contributing to the evolution of civil society through partnerships and social developmental projects. These principles defined logically the philosophy of CSR, which makes it humane and legitimate.

Methodologically, these elements not only explained CSR, characterised it, also help to easily measure it, calculate its gains and identify corporate interests therein and societal benefits. CSR helps to define the relationship between corporate world and the society in a given political and social environment. Any conceptualisation of CSR must place it within the methodological parameters of these relationships. As a relational concept, it must be appreciated within the role of both the corporate world and the society of community in which a firm operates. These roles define the logic and stability of the relationships and the benefit to be derived by each party thereof.

Theories and Dynamism of Corporate Social Responsibility

Over the last 50 years, (impliedly over 70 years now) business ethicists and management theorists have devoted much effort to thinking the dynamics of the relationships between business organisations and societies (Caroll & Buchholtz, 2000). This led to huge and broader scholarship. However, differences exist among scholars regarding the questions of: what are the social responsibilities of business organisation? Must business organisations be socially responsive and responsible? To whom would suggestion responsibilities be owed? How could they be discharged? What would be the role of government in this respect? These questions emanated when CSR intermingled with many of the issues traditionally addressed by government, like human rights and community investing. There is thus a strong contention that social problems could *only* be best addressed by governments. The resources of a business corporation are suited for addressing those social problems (Tsoutsoura, 2004). This was also the view of neoclassical thinkers. Given the conceptual overview of CSR, next section articulates its philosophical perspective by logically reviewing various theories of CSR that develop over the last five decades, and which could serve as frameworks of analysis for any empirical on CSR.

Classical View on CSR

The neo-classical economic scholars championed the negative relationship between CSR and society. According to Aupperle, Carrol, and Hatfield (1985) companies that engage in socially responsible behaviour are at a competitive disadvantage because they incur costs that could be avoided or transferred to other agents like customers or the government. Friedman (1970) stresses that the social responsibility of business organizations is to increase their profits. He argues that socially responsible activities are only for generating profit not for voluntary activities. Thus, Business Corporation has no responsibility except making profit in a legal way. He opined that, in a free society, “there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which means engaging in open and free competition without deception or fraud.” He stresses that the state addresses social problems, by taking money and resources that would otherwise go to owners, employees, and costumers, and allocating them according to the will of the minority, thereby failing to serve the interests of her/his principal. In this way, the executive imposes a tax and spends the proceeds for “social” purposes, which is intolerable, since he/she has neither the skills nor the jurisdiction to do so (Tsoutsoura, 2004; see also, Morsing & Spence, 2019; Soundararajan, Jamali & Spence 2017; Schmeltz, 2017; Resnick *et al*, 2016).

Friedman (1970) further maintained that, CSR may only incur additional cost and hence would jeopardize overall performance and sustainability of an organization. Similarly, Bishop (2004) opined that, companies’ CSR initiatives could diminish shareholders’ return, distract business leaders from their focus, and often allow companies to engage in bad behaviours in the shadow. Smith (2007) opines that, for any firm or business to pursue any other objective will be seen as fraud, which its effect could undermine the role of government. Companies should not allow

social responsibility to divert their attention away from the main goal of maximizing shareholders' value of interest. According to Martin (2002) and Baker (2008) money spent on CSR by managers is theft of the rightful property of the owners.

Implementing CSR principles involve costs. These costs might be short term in nature continuously outflows for a long time. Since being socially responsible by businesses organization involve costs, it should generate benefits as well in order to be sustainable enterprises. A business corporation could not continue a policy that constantly generates negative cash flows. The shareholders invest their money in a corporation, expecting the highest possible risk adjusted return. Therefore, being socially responsible should have bottom-line benefits in order to be sustainable (Tsoutsoura, 2004). The implication of viewing CSR in negativities could clearly dismiss any benefit real or imagine that are derivable thereof. Impliedly, CSR should not be perceived as negative social activities undertaken by business organisations. Students using this approach for analysis must be cautious not run into methological problem of attribution.

Shareholder Value Theory

Similar in assumptions and attributes to classical view is the shareholder value theory advocated by Mele (2008). Mele (2008) argues that a company's sole responsibility is to generate profits and increase the value of its stock. Social activities are only carried out if stipulated by law or if the activity contributes to increasing share value. It is worth noting that the main idea behind classical/economists' this view of CSR is that the primary criteria of business performance are economic efficiency and growth in the production of goods and services, all of which are determined by the acquisition of profits. In other words, the pursuit of self-interest by a business organization is the most effective way to enhance the public good. Predicated on this view, is that business organizations should not be responsibly engaged in CSR. However, this view and the classicalists are only informed by the general and broader philosophical tenets of capitalism, which held sway in western society for many centuries. However, there is a shift today from the classical operation of capitalism to emphasis on social welfare. This shift has invariably negated the classical and shareholder value theory of CSR. One must, therefore, contends that this negation has further consolidated the universality of CSR *vis-à-vis* business organizations rationale for engaging in such social responsibilities.

Socio-economic View on CSR

Further to the above, other scholars such as Freeman (1984), Caroll (1993, 1999) and Donaldson and Preston (1995) argued that a business corporation has numerous responsibilities towards its stakeholders. Kotler and Lee (2005) and Hossain *et al.* (2014) similarly maintains that corporate social responsibility is a commitment to improve community wellbeing through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources. Freeman (1984) stresses that companies that build better relationships with their primary stakeholders are likely to obtain greater returns. For example, Greening and Turban, (2000) noted that companies seen as socially responsible have a greater ability to recruit qualified employees. In addition, Godfrey (2005), adds that companies with socially responsible activities build moral and social capital among their stakeholders, which promotes a certain type of safety net against a loss of the company's reputation during downturn periods. The majority of empirical studies find results that attest to this positive association (see Benson & Davidson, 2010).

Many individuals and groups appeal for corporate adoption of CSR principles. Although government is mainly responsible for addressing those social issues, the contribution of private businesses could make considerable impacts. Government sets regulations and the minimum

standards for the workplace, but a company could further improve the work environment and quality of life of its employees. A business organisation cannot ignore the problems of the environment in which it operates. The poverty of citizenry, political unrest, and the exploitation of natural resources could have destructive effects to business corporations. For example, resources that are inputs in the production process and which, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, were abundant are now somewhat too scarce, polluted, or destroyed. Naturally, this imposes an extra cost to business corporations and may force them to relocate or to cease operations. From one perspective, companies may be poorly equipped to address some of the social or environmental problems, but from another perspective, no matter how poorly equipped, companies may still be best positioned to ameliorate the problems (Tsoutsoura, 2004). CSR could, therefore, be an instrument of addressing problems that seemingly could have devastating implications on the private sector itself. Engaging in CSR would definitely help business organizations to invariably address these problems as well.

Similarly, in a survey conducted and published in the Harvard Stark (1993) around the time of Friedman, 94% of the businessmen being the respondents felt that “spiritual, ethical, moral, and social considerations play an important role in profit making.” The survey highlighted that majority of businessmen at the time not only found it unethical, but also unprofitable to try and maximize profit without heeding to the societal norms and customs. The survey also reported that 99% of the respondents believed that having “sound ethics” would lead to good business in the long term. Although businessmen operating on behalf of corporations may not be acting ethically for purely altruistic purposes, they recognize the importance and interdependence of behaving responsibly in order to achieve what may be seen as their ultimate goal of profit making (Asmah, 2009). There are various theories that attempt to situate the role of ethics and ethical conduct in business as well as contextualizing CSR within the framework of responsiveness and ethical normativism (see also, Morsing & Spence, 2019; Soundararajan, Jamali & Spence 2017; Schmeltz, 2017; Resnick *et al*, 2016).

Stakeholder Theory

According to Mele (2008), a firm has interdependent interest groups, which includes; employees, customers, suppliers, and the local community aside its shareholders. It is, therefore, the satisfaction of all these legitimate interests that leads to long-term success. The stakeholder theory provides an important contribution in defining and developing CSR construct and it has in fact become one of the most important theories, which is frequently cited in the CSR literature. According to this theory, paying attention to the needs and rights of all stakeholders of a business organization is a useful way of developing socially responsible behaviour by managers (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). A socially responsible organization is seen as one in which obligations to stakeholders’ figure prominently in the decision-making of managers within the organization (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Gibson, 2000).

Whatten, Rands and Godfrey (2001) also argue that maximizing the wealth of shareholders alone could lead management to ignore other important stakeholders, including employees, suppliers, customers, and society at large. One way to resolve the conflict of CSR and firm’s financial performance, according to Mackey *et al.*, (2007) is to observe some forms of socially responsible behaviour by improving the present value of a firm’s future cash flows and be consistent with the wealth-maximizing interests of the firm’s shareholders. For example, socially responsible behaviour could enable a business firm to: differentiate its products in similar product market (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001; Waddock & Graves, 1997), avoid costly government-imposed fines (Freedman & Stagliano, 1991; Shane & Spicer, 1983), and minimize its exposure to risk (Godfrey,

2004). All of these socially responsible actions could increase the value of a firm's future cash flows and are, therefore, consistent with maximizing the wealth of the firm's shareholders.

The stakeholder theory further maintains that the objective of any business company should be derived by balancing the conflicting claims of these various stakeholders in the firm (Clarke, 2004). Stakeholders approach to corporate issues implies a shift in the traditional role of the Board of Directors, as defenders of shareholders' interest alone, to defenders of all stakeholders' interests. The theory identifies and models the groups, which are stakeholders of a business corporation. These groups include the governmental bodies, political groups, trade associations, trade unions, communities, associated corporations, prospective employees, prospective customers, and the public at large. This is perhaps the reason why business managers engage in CSR even when there is no law or legislation requiring them to partake in it. Nigeria provides a typical example here.

Social Contract Theory

According to Social Contract theory, business organizations must act in a responsible manner not only because it is in its commercial interest to do so, but because it is part of how society implicitly expect businesses to operate (Moir, 2001). The central idea of the social contract theory is how to relate a corporation to society. More so, according to social contract paradigm, a business is regarded as a social institution and should join with other social structures like the family, educational system and religious institution, to help enhance life and meet the needs of each other. In other words, the corporate social contract theory holds that business and society are equal partners, each enjoying a set of rights and having reciprocal responsibilities.

The proponents of this theory emphasized that business organizations host their operations within the society and in return society expects businesses to demonstrate responsibility for some aspects of its operations. Society recognizes organizations as agents particularly in the eyes of law and authorities; they use land, natural resources and offer employment opportunities (Gray, Owen and Adams, 1996; Donaldson and Dunfee, 1999). However, they consider business organizations as socially, morally and politically bounded to improve the quality of life of the society; they are, therefore, expected to enhance the life of consumers and workers, to promote justice by avoiding deceptions and frauds, respect their workers and avoiding harming any other social groups (Bitcha, 2000). How would businesses be bounded by social morality? This has been a long debate and should be determined by social context in which businesses operate. When tied to ethics, businesses had a moral obligation to take care of their customers' needs and aspirations. However, because of drive for profits, if left alone, business organisations are not likely to wilfully engage in CSR for moral reasons.

There is a direct and indirect mutual and reciprocal need between business corporations and society. While the former requires continuous support from the latter in terms of resources and sales, the latter might expect the former to operate in a socially responsible manner since business corporations control tremendous amount of economic and productive resources such as technology, finances and labour which directly or indirectly may affect the society in which it operates (Lantos, 2002). The social contract theory is fundamental in its justification for CSR, in viewing CSR from the perspective of an explicit or implicit social contract underscores *obligations* and *rights* of each party to the contract—business organizations and society. It is for this reason that moral or ethical justifications are given to CSR, and for the same reason why societies respect, uphold and obliged to the terms and conditions of business organizations and in turn for business companies to also periodically engage in giving back to communities as a way of their contribution to continuous and sustainable development of such societies. Seeing CSR not from the perspective of social contract creates tensions, which could endanger peaceful and harmonious

interactions and relationship between business organizations and societies. It is within this paradigmatic understanding that many studies were conducted. The social contract theory offers prime pillars through the lens of which many studies examine CSR and business organisations in both developed and developing economies (see Bande, 2018).

Instrumental or Strategic Theory

This theory stresses that business organizations may choose to support some social programs for reasons of good image and for competitive advantage. In an attempt to further legitimize the role of corporations in society, an instrumental theory has developed CSR as a strategic tool to achieve economic objectives. The proponents of this theory asserted that business organizations may choose to support some social programs for reasons of good image, public relations strategy, firm's competitive advantage or other strategic reasons without jeopardizing the interests of their primary stakeholders, namely, the shareholders. Some of the prominent proponents of strategic CSR theory are Burke and Logsdon (1996), Lantos (2002), Johnson (2003), Greenfield (2004), and Melé (2008) among others. They contend that maintenance of a good corporate reputation through CSR initiatives may add to reputational capital, which may be profitable in the long run since market forces provide financial incentives for perceived socially responsible behaviour. The major problem with this theoretical assumption is that business organisation following this line of thinking would be seen to selfishly consolidate their interest. Other stakeholders, such as the community in which businesses operate would be seen excluded from any decision relating to CSR. This is a negation of participatory CSR framework.

Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy theory entails the response to the environmental pressures involving social, political and economic forces. The perceptions of society towards the organizations are crucial, which may affect the survival of business organisations. The idea behind this theory states that CSR is a response to the environmental pressures involving social, political and economic forces. According to the theory, business organizations look for a balance between their actions and how they are perceived by outsiders and what is thought by society to be appropriate (Suchman, 1995; Deegan, 2002). The perceptions of society towards business organizations are crucial, which may affect the survival of any business organisation if it has breached its 'social contract' as discussed earlier. In the event where a society is not satisfied that a business firm is operating in an unacceptable and illegitimate manner, then society would effectively revoke the organizations' contract from operations (Davies 1997). The argument of legitimacy theory viewing CSR from the perspective of environmental pressures does not contradict the assumptions of social contract. Legitimacy theory rather re-affirms the logics of social contract. Even where business organizations respond to environmental pressure from the society, especially in view of how firms utilize, explore and appropriate human and material resources, through responsive CSR activities, such response could be viewed from the perspective of social contract. Indeed, if a business organization decline to respond, the consequences may be detrimental to it and in the long run may experience loss of business, loss of profit, poor patronage and even closure of business and/or relocation to other destinations.

From the above discussion, there is overlap between the theories used to explain CSR and its justification in the business operation. In sum, business firms engage in CSR to secure their license to operate (legitimacy), whereby business firms are required to meet the interests and demands of the multiple stakeholder groups and honour both the explicit and implicit contracts with various constituents' stakeholders. As a result of honouring contracts, a business corporation

develops a reputation, which in turn secures a competitive advantage in the market and ultimately gains long-term profitability and viability (Dusuki, 2008).

Conclusions

It is clear that there exists a controversy on legitimacy of CSR. It was on this basis that divergent views emerged. The most popular views among them are; the Classical economists' and the Socio-economic view (managerial). This is as a result of CSR activities that come into contact with many of the issues traditionally addressed by government. The classical thinkers like Milton Friedman and Adam Smith, emphasized that business should only concentrate on making profits for their owners and leave solutions of social problems to individuals and organizations concerned i.e. government organizations.

While the socio-classical view holds the opposite view, in that it depicts that managers of large corporation should be responsible for balancing the claims and rights of many diverse groups among them employees, customers, suppliers, and the local community, rather than enhancing the wealth of the shareholders alone. Again, Freeman (1984), Donaldson and Preston (1995) and Carroll (1999) argue that a corporation has numerous responsibilities towards its stakeholders; and that CSR is a commitment to improve community wellbeing through discretionary business practices and contribution of corporate resources. In conclusion, it should be noted that there is no best theoretical and conceptual frameworks out there for all kind of research on CSR. Each theoretical and conceptual framework to be applied must contain all the necessary variables and terms that could help to address research questions, hypotheses and objectives. Any departure from this would be futile effort.

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