
Editorial: Governance of CSR: complexities within contexts – how does ‘governance’ at different levels influence the corporate responsibility agenda?

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1 Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been at the forefront of academic discussion for over half a century (Carroll, 1999). At the core of CSR lies the commitment by businesses not only to conduct themselves ethically towards multiple stakeholders including the society at large, but also to ensure sustainable economic progression (Husted and Allen, 2007). The governance of CSR consists of “specific procedures and

processes to govern corporate performance in areas such as human rights, labour standards, environmental practices, anti-corruption activities, responsible investment, stakeholder engagement and responsible supply chain management” [Albareda, (2013), p.551]. The institutional embeddedness of these issues requires the governance of CSR to be inherently linked to the expectations of external stakeholders, including national and regional governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), supra-national organisations and a host of other stakeholders (Windsor, 2007).

In this context, the *governance* of CSR within different national, regional and global institutional environments would have strong implications for firm-level CSR. However, the advent of globalisation has resulted in a negation to a greater extent of the two-sector model of governance (i.e., firm-government) largely due to the dynamic and complex institutional environment which has developed globally over time (Windsor, 2007). Furthermore, the erosion of citizenship rights as a result of globalisation has also transferred the role of upholding civil and social rights of citizens across nations to global NGOs and other civil society actors (CSOs) (Matten et al., 2003). The implications for CSR within such a transformative system of *global governance* are as yet unresolved.

Finkelstein (1995, p.369) defines *global governance* as “governing, without sovereign authority, relationships that transcend national frontiers – it is doing internationally what governments do at home.” It requires actors to engage in institutionalised and *ad hoc* processes to resolve issues which transcend national boundaries, and to implement decisions taken at bilateral, regional or transnational levels, to achieve pre-agreed upon outcomes (Finkelstein, 1995). In the transnational sphere, the inherent institutional embeddedness of CSR, together with its self-regulatory nature, has enabled its emergence as an important contributory element to *global governance* (Arora et al., 2020).

In the global west, CSR governance has been driven predominantly by the rise of neoliberalism (Givel, 2013) and has been investigated academically from the perspective of self-regulation (or self-governance) (Gond et al., 2011; Moon and Vogel, 2008), relational governance (Midttun, 2005) and new governance (Moon, 2002). To this effect, scholars have reviewed the contributions of actors such as governments (e.g., Albareda et al., 2007; Fox et al., 2002; Dentchev et al., 2015; Dentchev et al., 2017), CSOs (e.g., Scholte, 2004) and global institutions (e.g., Baccaro and Mele, 2011; Park, 2007; Vives, 2004) towards CSR strategy formulation, governance and implementation. Findings from this body of work significantly support the involvement of multiple actors within CSR governance, argued to consist of “procedures and processes to govern corporate performance in relation to diverse socio-environmental issues, involving private, public and civil actors working together to achieve collaborative outcomes” (Vallentin, 2015; Albareda, 2013).

Nevertheless, CSR governance literature lacks insights into the interactions and contestations which occur between and amongst those private, public and civil actors, at local, national and transnational levels of governance (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2018; Manning et al., 2012). At the national level, we need more insights about government actions or inactions in propagating CSR, as well as how socio-cultural specificities are resolved within national CSR governance systems. At the transnational level, the multi-actor interactions undertaken to resolve global solutions for CSR issues need to be examined. The papers presented in this special issue (see Table 1) address these gaps in extant literature and, by doing so, collectively highlight key issues of the emerging paradigm of global governance for CSR.

Table 1 Overview of articles in the special issue

<i>Author, title and method</i>	<i>Research question(s)</i>	<i>Key focus, findings and contributions</i>
<p>Pagan: ‘The challenge is who rules the world’: accounts and implications of transnational governance interactions</p> <p>Empirical: Qualitative study with 13 respondents, who were participants in the annual congregations at the World Economic Forum</p> <p>Ndiweni and Sibanda: CSR governance framework of South Africa, pre, during and post-apartheid: a manifestation of ‘ubuntu’ values?</p> <p>Empirical: Adopts a historical-cultural context approach to contextualise the research problem, thereby analysing historical events with the use of personal accounts, memoirs, and document analyses related to the social, cultural and political structural changes in the selected country over time.</p>	<p>How is the agenda of transnational governance negotiated in multi-stakeholder contexts?</p> <p>Did ‘ubuntu’ values influence the CSR governance framework in South Africa?</p>	<p>Explores the ‘lived’ experiences of multiple actors’ interactions when setting goals and agendas for CSR in the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the World Social Forum (WSF).</p> <p>The findings highlight processes of negotiation and compromise which occur amongst key actors and reaffirm the need to have ‘transnational spaces’ in setting transnational CSR.</p> <p>The paper adopts a historical-cultural context approach to understand why South Africa’s CSR governance framework is unique and assesses the degree of integration of cultural values within it.</p> <p>The findings indicate the adoption of an inclusive approach to CSR governance in South Africa, where the ‘ubuntu’ ethos has been aligned within the features of the CSR governance framework of the country.</p>

Table 1 Overview of articles in the special issue (continued)

<i>Author, title and method</i>	<i>Research question(s)</i>	<i>Key focus, findings and contributions</i>
<p>Lu: The Chinese approach to CSR development: an analysis of CSR-government relationship in China</p> <p>Empirical: Applies Gond et al.'s (2011) framework to examine the role of the Chinese Government and other stakeholders, including state-owned enterprises (SOEs), foreign multinational enterprises (MNEs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in promoting CSR</p>	<p>What is the role of the Chinese Government and other key stakeholders in promoting CSR in China, taking into consideration its political, cultural and societal contexts?</p>	<p>The paper evaluates the involvement of the Chinese government in CSR. In doing so, it provides a clearer picture of the historical evolution of CSR within China, and the changes in the attitude and the role of the Chinese Government in promoting CSR. It further examines the roles of the other important actors in China's CSR development, like state-owned enterprises (SOEs), multinational enterprises (MNEs), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).</p> <p>The findings indicate that, while the role of the Chinese Government aligns with Gond et al.'s (2011) five-part typology of various roles that the government could play in supporting CSR, CSR governance in China also consist of many unique characteristics, such as the role of the Chinese Government in directing the discourse on CSR in the country, and the pervasive influence of Chinese traditional culture, based on Confucian philosophy, in engendering a uniquely Chinese approach to CSR.</p>
<p>Pearson: Corporate social responsibility, hydraulic fracturing and unregulated space: recognising responsibility without the law</p> <p>Conceptual: Uses recent legal developments in relation to hydraulic fracturing ('fracking') as an illustrative example to examine whether CSR is possible in a legal vacuum.</p>	<p>If CSR is meeting legal standards as a minimum and preferably 'going beyond' them, and law can be accepted as that with which firms must comply, then what is CSR in spaces where law is absent (i.e., within areas of unregulated space)?</p>	<p>This paper considers the role of legal regulation in assessing the actions of firms in relation to CSR.</p> <p>The findings, focusing on hydraulic fracturing and the UK's Infrastructure Act, provide a case of where law is absent in the context of CSR. The review of legal standards in this specific case presents not only a challenge to CSR in the context of that industry, but also raises questions about the judgement of CSR more widely.</p> <p>As such, the paper urges a review of extant discourse on CSR and demands evaluation of what is 'responsible' where that which is not responsible cannot be so clearly defined. In effect, whether CSR governance itself is more reliant on legal standards in the judgement of responsibility in the context of CSR needs to be reviewed.</p>

Pagan explores the ‘lived experiences’ of actor-interactions in transnational multi-stakeholder forums, focusing on how the actors negotiate and compromise to finalise a transnational agenda. Her findings reaffirm the need to have ‘transnational spaces’ for multi-stakeholder interactions to occur so that the actors can resolve and achieve consensus on agendas for transnational governance of CSR.

Ndiweni and Sibanda explore the evolution of CSR governance in South Africa, adopting a historical-cultural context approach, specifically evaluating the influence of African ‘ubuntu’ cultural values in engendering the country’s CSR governance framework. Their findings conclude that a substantive integration of ‘ubuntu’ values has occurred within the CSR governance framework of South Africa, impacting transformational socio-economic changes in the country.

Lu maps the evolution of CSR governance in China, using Gond et al.’s (2011) CSR-government configurations to examine the role of the Chinese government in developing its relationships with various institutional stakeholders. Her findings reiterate the powerful role played by the Chinese government in simultaneously engendering as well as directing the discourse on CSR in the country, through a network of inter-relationships between the government and other stakeholders. Most importantly, Lu identifies the pervasive influence of ‘traditional’ Chinese values, leading to an adaptation of the western concepts of CSR to establish a *Chinese CSR* in the country.

In contrast to the first three papers in this special issue, Pearson addresses the issue of an ‘absence’ of governance, thus questioning the fundamentals of CSR in the context of a ‘legal vacuum’. He does so by critically reviewing the legal standards in policy interpretations of CSR in the UK, in relation to the controversial practice of hydraulic fracturing (or ‘fracking’).

2 Implications for further research

While the papers in this special issue certainly provide much needed insights into the multifaceted nature of governance of CSR across differing contexts, questions still remain and require further research.

In relation to the *nature of governance for CSR*, scholars should further examine *transnational spaces* where multi-actor governance for CSR takes place. What contestations occur amongst and between multiple actors in transnational governance systems? How do multiple actors overcome restrictions imposed through their boundaries – i.e., business, political, and civil society – to resolve those contestations through proactive interactions to shape the governance agendas for CSR at the transnational level?

It is also important to further explore national-level governance specifically focusing on cultural influences upon CSR governance. Both Ndiweni and Sibanda and Lu in this special issue emphasise the integration of cultural nuances and values within extant national governance systems. They argue for the need to have more localised and culturally embedded CSR governance models, in order to compel more context-specific corporate responses to address socio-environmental issues. Thus, questions remain about the transference of endemic cultural values and norms to formal governance mechanisms for CSR. Do national CSR governance frameworks capture the localised understandings

of CSR? How do countries formalise informal cultural values pertaining to social responsibility? What are the national-level evolutionary trajectories for CSR governance?

While the role of national governments in engendering CSR governance systems in developed countries have been extensively researched, insights into developing countries remain scarce. Thus, understanding the role of the national government within the national-level governance for CSR in developing countries, specifically in emerging markets such as China and India, is important. The dynamics created through political and socio-cultural systems in these countries could compel national governments to adopt a more authoritarian role in influencing the CSR discourse, together with enacting related governance mechanisms. Can we identify different patterns for CSR-government relationships across developing countries? How do governments resolve institutional complexities and/or constraints prevalent in developing countries to engender CSR?

Finally, there is a need to explore CSR governance from the perspective of regulatory and legal standards. In this regard, the fundamental tenets of CSR as those corporate behaviours which go beyond mere compliance with legal standards, need to be revisited. This is much needed in specific sectors, where legal standards could be 'absent' or there is a regulatory vacuum. Thus, researchers need to examine aspects such as: How would corporations define and engage in CSR when they operate in a sector devoid of legal standards? Can corporations be relied upon to self-regulate through voluntary engagement in CSR, when there is an absence of regulations?

These are just a few suggestions for further work on CSR governance. It is hoped this introductory essay and the four papers contained in this special issue prompt further research endeavours, as well as providing valuable insights in their own right.

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