Dimensions in CSR: an evaluation of current definitions

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Abstract

Despite numerous efforts to produce a clear and objective definition of corporate social responsibility (CSR), there is still confusion regarding how CSR should be defined. In this work four dimensions of CSR are developed, by performing a content analysis of existing CSR definitions. Frequency counters are used to analyze how often these dimensions are present. The analysis shows how existing definitions are similar to a high degree. The article comes to the conclusion that confusion is not about the way CSR is defined, but how companies built in a specific context.

Keywords

Corporate social responsibility, definition, dimensions.

Résumé

Malgré les nombreux efforts pour produire une définition claire et objective de la responsabilité sociale des entreprises (RSE), il y a encore une confusion liée à la façon dont RSE devrait être défini. Dans cet article sont mis au point quatre dimensions du RSE, grâce à une analyse du contenu des définitions du RSE existantes. Les fréquences sont analysées pour identifier les dimensions utilisées dans les différentes définitions. L'analyse montre comment les définitions sont semblables à un degré suffisant. L'article conclut qu'il n'y a aucune confusion liée à la définition de RSE, mais à la manière les entreprises utilisent RSE dans un contexte spécifique.

Mots-clés

Responsabilité sociale des entreprises, définition, dimensions.

Introduction

The corporate world faces today with the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) at each step. Corporations are encouraged to have a socially responsible behaviour on a wide range of situations (Engle, 2006; Welford and Frost, 2006). However, both in the corporate world and in the academic one there is uncertainty of how CSR should be defined. Some go so far as saying "we have sought a definition and in principle there is one" (Jackson and Hawker, 2001). This is not exactly true; the problem is rather that there is an abundance of definitions, which are, according to Van Marrewijk (2003) often inclined towards specific interests and thus impede the development and implementation of the concept.

The confusion surrounding the definition of CSR can be a potential problem. If competing definitions have divergent meanings, people will talk about the different CSR and thus, prevent productive commitments. And even if it would develop an objective definition, it will require all people engaged in CSR which applied it effectively for this confusion to be resolved.

In this paper, CSR is seen as a social construction and, thus, it is not possible to develop an objective definition (Berger and Luckmann, 1996). But studying the similarities and differences between the existing definitions is possible. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to study the way CSR is defined in the most popular existing approaches. The definitions are categorized into four dimensions and there are often used Google countings to explore systematically how these dimensions are invoked. This will be possible through a study of how CSR, as it appears in the definition, it should be understood.

Current methodological approaches

In time many attempts to establish a better meaning of CSR a nd to develop a more robust definition were made. The best-known academic

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literature is Carroll's research of the definitions of CSR (1999), which indicates that the first formal definition was Bowen's (1953). Moir (2001) extends the analysis using this methodology to include the definitions the companies consider. Others too have presented studies of definitions available (Carter and Jennings, 2004; Joyner and Payne, 2002). Such studies are deemed necessary in order to provide an overview of the historical development of the concepts as CSR. However, they present only a count of the existing definitions, which is not a strong basis for understanding how CSR is currently social constructed.

Another methodological approach is conducting interviews. O'Dwyer (2002), although he does not provide an explicit definition of CSR, investigates the perception of CSR through in-depth interviews with 29 managers. Azer (2001) presents three definitions supposed to be "well known" of CSR and explores them through interviewing business representatives. She reports that although 5 of the 11 respondents adhere to the idea of an explicit definition of CSR, this does not correspond with their perception about CSR when they are asked to explain the concept with more details. This problem is encountered by Johnson and Beatson (2005), which say that the respondents had difficulty articulating a formal definition of CSR. The interviews are a primary source for in-depth knowledge of the views of respondents. However, besides the problems reported by Azer (2001) and Johnson and Beatson (2005), the interviews are usually context specific and limited in purpose, making it difficult to use their results in different contexts.

Another methodological approach is constructing a theoretical thinking. There are a lot of examples: Van Marrewijk (2003) combines with the literature analysis with the philosophical one; RARE (2005) explains CSR using "accountability" philosophy of Hart (1968); Matten and Crane (2005), although they define the company's corporate citizenship, they have an approach based on how the term "nationality" is used in political sciences; and Göbbels (2002), with the help of linguistics, comes to the conclusion that CSR should be renamed "societal" corporate responsibility. Although these approaches are helpful in reframing concepts like CSR, they prevent the main premise to see CSR as a social construction.

Method

The works referred to above do not represent a complete bibliography of research on definitions of CSR, but they show the variety of methodological approaches applied. However, none of these does intend or is suitable to study the definition of CSR as socially constructed through discourse.

The method applied here follows three steps. First, definitions of CSR have been gathered through research literature. Second, the four dimensions of CSR were identified through a content analysis of those definitions. On this base, a coding scheme was developed and applied to notice which definition relates to one dimension. Third, the measurement of the frequency of occurrence of all definitions on Google referring to a certain dimension has been added, in order to calculate the relative proportion of each use.

The third step deserves a more elaborate justification. Not all definitions are so significant to understand the way CSR is defined; the most widely used definition is more significant than a definition which is used less frequently. This principle has been used for a long time by linguists (Blair et al., 2002; Howes and Solomon, 1951; Kageura and Umino, 1996; Murphy, 1992).

The relative use of each definition can be obtained by comparing the frequency of occurrence on a search engine. The Internet fits this purpose well, because, as Blair et al. (2002) say, is a "comprehensive, contemporary, and easily searchable" database language. They further empirically show that the Internet provides measurements of the frequency of occurrence, valid when compared to other linguistic databases.

The decision to obtain frequency measurements using Google was made because it is the largest and most widely used search engine available on the Internet (Sullivan, 2006a, 2006b).

Analysis

The assembly of CSR definitions

The definitions have been compiled through extensive research of the literature, both in magazines and websites. When a web page reffered to the definition articulated by another original source, it was extracted. Further, the literature has shown that other terms, like corporate citizenship, are used as a substitute for CSR (ISO COPOLCO, 2002; Tulder, 2003). However, in order to avoid confusion in the event that these terms would not be similar, only definitions of "corporate social responsibility" were used.

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Table 1. The four dimensions, as they were applied to the encoding scheme and sample sentences

Dimensions	The definition is encoded at dimension if it refers to it	Phrases examples
Ecological dimension	The natural environment	"a cleaner environment" "environment" "in relation to environmental concerns in business operations"
Social dimension	The relationship between companies and society	"contributes to a better society" "the integration of social concerns in their business operations" "a consideration of the purpose of their impact on the communities"
Economic dimension	Socio-economic or financing aspects, including CSR in terms of description of business operations	"contribute to economic development" "keeping profitability" "business operations"
The size of the stakeholders	Stakeholders or groups of stakeholders	"the interaction with their stakeholders" "how organizations interact with employees, suppliers, customers and their communities" "treating stakeholders"

Altogether there were found and analyzed 29 definitions of CSR. The definitions come from 24 authors and cover a period from 1980 to 2003. The definitions were mainly European and American in origin, but definitions from India or Canada have been included also.

Developing a coding scheme

One encoding scheme available before this analysis it was Dahlsrud's (2005), who developed it by applying a technique called emergent encoding, which uses the data to be encoded to create a coding scheme. Analyzing the definitions, it became obvious that they were related to many of the same dimensions of CSR. Thus, the sentences which pertained to the same dimension were grouped. This process has identified four dimensions, which have been named to reflect the contents of the phrases. Table 1 illustrates the encoding scheme, the four dimensions and sample sentences that relate to these dimensions.

Dimensions against which was classified each definition are shown in the appendix.

Measurement of frequency of occurrence on Google

The frequency of occurrence was obtained by searching with Google for each definition and it is shown in the appendix. A score of dimensions was calculated by adding the frequency of each definition listed in dimension by applying the formula (1)

$$DS = \sum_{j=1}^{x} F_{Defji}$$

in which

DSi = dimension score for the size i

FDefji = frequency of occurrence for the definition j classified in the dimension i

x = total number of definitions listed under dimension i.

To assess the use of the relative proportion of each dimension a ratio of dimension was calculated, by dividing the dimensions score to the sum of the frequencies of occurrence for all definitions, using (2).

$$DR_i = \frac{DS_i}{\sum_{k=1}^{y} F_{Defk}} \times 100\%$$

in which

DRi = dimension ratio for dimension i

DSi = dimension score for dimension i

FDefk = frequency of occurrence for the definition k

Y = the total number of definitions from analysis

Scale scores and reports of results are shown in Table 2. The biggest scores were comparable size ratios above 80%, although it is worth noting that the ecological dimension has significantly lower performance, 59%. However, all dimensions obtained more than 50%, reports indicating that they are rather to be entered into a random definition than not to be.

Table 2. The number of dimensions included in the definitions and their percentage of the total frequency of occurrence on Google

Size	Score scale	Dimension ratio (%)
The size of the stakeholders	974	86
Social dimension	959	83
Economic dimension	948	81
Ecological dimension	657	58

Table 3. The number the dimensions, the number of definitions and the percentage of the total frequency of occurrence on Google

The dimensions that are included in the definition	The number of definitions	% of the total frequency of occurrence on Google
4	11	38
≥ 3	23	79
≥ 2	25	86
≥ 1	29	100

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Further, uniformity (correspondence) of definitions has been studied, by analyzing how many different dimensions were used in every definition. Again this is analyzed using frequencies of occurrence on Google. Table 3 shows how many dimensions are included in definitions and their percentage in the total frequency on Google, in ascending order. From Table 3 is obviously that 11 definitions, accounting for about 38% of the total frequency of occurrence, includes all four dimensions. It's interesting to see that for two or more dimensions these numbers grow to 25 and 86% of the total frequency of occurrence.

Discussion

Ecological dimension has a size significantly smaller than other dimensions. An explanation could be as Carroll's (1999) analysis on literature showed, that ecological dimension was not included in the initial definitions, and this may have influenced the current definitions not to include it. Another reason is that the ecological dimension is not included explicitly in the definition, although it is considered part of CSR. This is particularly exposed by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), which differentiates between "corporate social responsibility" and "corporate responsibility towards the environment" and offers two definitions of CSR, none of which include ecological dimension (WBCSD, 1999, 2000). However, when CSR is explained in more depth, the ecological and social dimension is emphasized equally. If the frequency of occurrence for the WBCSD definitions would be added to the ecological dimension, the dimension ratio would increase from 58 to 79% and thus would be comparable to the other dimensions.

Based on the dimension ratio, there is a probability higher of 50% for any of the dimensions to be included in a random definition. Thus, all dimensions are needed to understand the way CSR is defined. Furthermore, the analysis shows that there is a 90% probability that at least two of the dimensions to be used in a definition. Although specific definitions diverge somewhat with respect to what dimension they use, they don't seem to do this in a systematic manner. Thus, it is not possible to separate the definitions in different schools of thought. One over another, this shows that the four dimensions are used in the definitions in a non-contradictory way.

But how is CSR understood by the way it is defined? Dimensions of social, economic and ecological are only different categories of impact on the part of the business. However, such a distinction is a recognition of the fact that companies as a producer of wealth, have not only economic impact. Furthermore, the distinction is helpful since different sets of tools must be used when considering and administering social, economic and ecological impact of the company. (Dahlsrud, 2005).

The definitions do not provide any description of optimal performance, or how this impact should be balanced in the decision-making process. However, they describe the processes in which they can be established.

But what is the optimal performance beyond the requirements of regulation or where there is no regulation? Definitions answer this question by pointing to the stakeholders. Creating a balance between the often conflicting concerns of stakeholders is an ambitious task, and the definitions use rather ambiguous phrases to describe how these concerns should be considered. Thus, the only conclusion that one can draw from definitions is that optimal performance is dependent on the company's stakeholders.

It is interesting to note that none of the definitions does really define the social responsibility of business, as has been discussed of Milton Friedman (1970), but describe CSR as a phenomenon. This may be due to definitional confusion: not so much the confusion regarding the way CSR is defined, but the one regarding what constitutes business social responsibility.

A CSR strategy, after Van Marrewijk (2003), must be specified in the particular context of each business, i.e. what are the CSR themes specific to be addressed and how to engage stakeholders. However, a definition which refers to these problems would not be applicable in a wide variety of contexts, and thus would be less useful as a definition. This is in accordance with the definitions analyzed; questions remain open and definitions are independent of context. So knowledge of how CSR is built in a specific social context must be obtained by means other than a definition of CSR (Mitchell et al. (1997) have a conceptual framework identifying the stakeholders).

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Definitions illustrate how CSR does not represent anything new at the conceptual level; companies have always had social, economic and ecological impact, they were concerned with their stakeholders, whether it was government, owners or customers, and had to do with the rules. This was achieved through stable models developed along years. However, at the operational level, the story is different. Due to globalization, the context in which companies operates is changing rapidly. New stakeholders and different national legislation create new expectations from companies and change the way the social, economic and environmental impact should be balanced in the decision-making process. Thus, in such a context, tools of CSR management are necessary, in addition to the previously established models, to develop and implement a successful business strategy.

Conclusion

There are many definitions available for CSR and they are in agreement with the reference to the four dimensions: stakeholders, social, environmental and economic. Although they use different expressions, the definitions are largely congruent, making the lack of a single universally accepted definition less problematic than it might seem at first glance.

CSR definitions describe a phenomenon but fail to put forward guidelines on how to manage challenges of this phenomenon. Thus, the challenge for companies is not to define CSR, but to understand the way CSR is constructed in a specific context and how to handle corporate social responsibility when developing business strategies.

Appendix

The table contains the analysed definitions, their source, the frequency they appear on Google and the dimensions they comprise.

Source	Definition	Frequency	Dimensions
Hopkins, 1998	Corporate social responsibility is concerned with treating the stakeholders of the firm ethically or in a socially responsible manner. Stakeholders exist both within a firm and outside. Consequently, behaving socially responsibly will increase the human development of stakeholders both within and outside the corporation	476	Stakeholder Social
Business for Social Responsibility, 2000	Operating a business in a manner that meets or exceeds the ethical, legal, commercial and public expectations that society has of business. Social responsibility is a guiding principle for every decision made and in every area of a business	472	Stakeholder Economic
World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 1999	The commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life	341	Stakeholder Social Economic
World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2000	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 the local community and society at large	335	Stakeholder Social Economic
Commission of the European Communities, 2001	A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis	303	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Jones, 1980	CSR is defined as the notion that corporations have an obligation to constituent groups in society other than stockholders and beyond that prescribed by law or union contract, indicating that a stake may go beyond mere ownership	271	Stakeholder
Business for Social Responsibility, 2000	Business decision making linked to ethical values, compliance with legal requirements and respect for people, communities and the environment	255	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
McWilliams and Siegel, 2001	Actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law	254	Social
Business for Social Responsibility, 2003b	Corporate social responsibility is achieving commercial success in ways that honour ethical values and respect people, communities and the natural environment	231	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Pinney, 2001	Corporate social responsibility (CSR) corporate citizenship can most simply be defined as a set of management practices that ensure the company minimizes the negative impacts of its operations on society while maximizing its positive impacts	122	Social

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CSRwire, 2003	CSR is defined as the integration of business operations and values, whereby the interests of all stakeholders including investors, customers, employees and the environment are reflected in the company's policies and actions	96	Stakeholder Environmental Economic
Khoury *et al.*, 1999	Corporate social responsibility is the overall relationship of the corporation with all of its stakeholders. These include customers, employees, communities, owners/investors, government, suppliers and competitors. Elements of social responsibility include investment in community outreach, employee relations, creation and maintenance of employment, environmental stewardship and financial performance	77	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Marsden, 2001	Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is about the core behaviour of companies and the responsibility for their total impact on the societies in which they operate. CSR is not an optional add-on nor is it an act of philanthropy. A socially responsible corporation is one that runs a profitable business that takes account of all the positive and negative environmental, social and economic effects it has on society	73	Social Environmental Economic
Ethics in Action Awards, 2003	CSR is a term describing a company's obligation to be accountable to all of its stakeholders in all its operations and activities. Socially responsible companies consider the full scope of their impact on communities and the environment when making decisions, balancing the needs of stakeholders with their need to make a profit	42	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Reder, 1994	An all-encompassing notion, [corporate] social responsibility refers to both the way a company conducts its internal operations, including the way it treats its work force, and its impact on the world around it	37	Stakeholder Social Environmental
Lea, 2002	CSR can be roughly defined as the integration of social and environmental concerns in business operations, including dealings with stakeholders	26	Stakeholder Social Environmental
Lea, 2002	CSR is about businesses and other organizations going beyond the legal obligations to manage the impact they have on the environment and society. In particular, this could include how organizations interact with their employees, suppliers, customers and the communities in which they operate, as well as the extent they attempt to protect the environment	24	Stakeholder Social Environmental
Ethical Performance, 2003	At its best, CSR is defined as the responsibility of a company for the totality of its impact, with a need to embed society's values into its core operations as well as into its treatment of its social and physical environment. Responsibility is accepted as encompassing a spectrum – from the running of a profitable business to the health and safety of staff and the impact on the societies in which a company operates	23	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Global Corporate Social Responsibility Policies Project, 2003	Global corporate social responsibility can defined as business practices based on ethical values and respect for workers, communities and the environment	21	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
IndianNGOs.com, 2003	Corporate social responsibility is a business process wherein the institution and the individuals within are sensitive and careful about the direct and indirect effect of their work on internal and external communities, nature and the outside world	19	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Foran, 2001	CSR can be defined as the set of practices and behaviours that firms adopt towards their labour force, towards the environment in which their operations are embedded, towards authority and towards civil society	13	Stakeholder Social Environmental

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Frederick *et al.*, 1992	Corporate social responsibility can be defined as a principle stating that corporations should be accountable for the effects of any of their actions on their community and environment	12	Stakeholder Social Environmental
Woodward-Clyde, 1999	CSR has been defined as a 'contract' between society and business wherein a community grants a company a license to operate and in return the matter meets certain obligations and behaves in an acceptable manner	10	Stakeholder
UK Government, 2001	Corporate social responsibility recognizes that the private sector's wider commercial interests require it to manage its impact on society and the environment in the widest sense. This requires it to establish an appropriate dialogue or partnership with relevant stakeholders, be they employees, customers, investors, suppliers or communities. CSR goes beyond legal obligations, involving voluntary, private sector-led engagement, which reflects the priorities and characteristics of each business, as well as sectoral and local factors	3	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Andersen, 2003	We define corporate social responsibility broadly to be about extending the immediate interest from oneself to include one's fellow citizens and the society one is living in and is a part of today, acting with respect for the future generation and nature	2	Stakeholder Social Environmental
Van Marrewijk, 2003	In general, corporate sustainability and refer to company activities – voluntary by definition – demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders	0	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Van Marrewijk, 2001	Companies with a CSR strategy integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interactions with their stakeholders and demonstrate openly their triple P performances	0	Stakeholder Social Environmental Economic
Jackson and Hawker, 2001	Corporate social responsibility is how you treat your employees and all your stakeholders and the environment	0	Stakeholder Social Environmental
Strategis, 2003	CSR is generally seen as the business contribution to sustainable development, which has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, and is generally understood as focussing on how to achieve the integration of economic, environmental and social imperatives	0	Social Environmental Economic

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