Guest Editorial

Systems Thinking and Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) means something to everyone, however typically, not the same thing to everyone (Carroll, 1999). The widespread acceptance and growth of CSR in business and society has not been mirrored by consensus. The complexities apparent in CSR theory and practice have led to a veritable CSR labyrinth. Organizations engage with CSR despite being unsure of whether it is in the best interests of their business, society or both (Aguilera et al., 2007). In practice, the ability to reconcile a wider range of interests to decide upon and prioritize socially responsible actions has been challenging.

To date, contributors and practitioners often approach the topic from a narrow perspective or discipline; however, CSR is predicated upon understanding multiple perspectives and relationships that would benefit from the use of holistic methods. This is a claim that we find continuously raised; but so far we have not seen a great deal that addresses how the process of CSR can then be developed, taking into account such multiple (and often conflicting) perspectives.

We also need to make sense of CSR as a continuation or rethinking of traditional business practices so that we can become critical about CSR manifestations, its different flavours and possibilities. From our own separate experiences as business educators, we see that initial enthusiasm into engaging in doing good for society is being translated into different results: business organizations set up foundations to care for the community (and hence, we argue, isolate themselves from the practice of CSR); others enrich their operations by incorporating measures of environmental, social and even moral claims. Others propose sustainability as a next goal to achieve (Hawkins, 2006). How can we then assess the nature of these and other motivations to develop CSR, and how can we support them critically in their implementation?

The motivation for this special issue therefore arises from an intuitive belief that systems thinking as a discipline is mature enough to offer a variety of concepts, approaches and methodologies that could help those individuals and organizations to make sense of the complexities encountered in CSR; to involve a number of stakeholders and to reflect on the consequences of decisions that incorporate ‘new’ issues brought by CSR practice. In the past, it has been argued that systems thinking could become a partner of organizational theory. A number of strands have been opened up (e.g. functionalist, interpretive, emancipatory); and guidelines and principles have been defined to even operate as being guided by radical assumptions about organizations (Galliers et al., 1997; Jackson, 2003). Today, systems thinking is to some people a discipline in which the synergies obtained by working (again in partnership) with other disciplines (e.g. critical theory), can lay out the foundations of a more explicitly ethical practice.

But still when talking about partnership and the possibility that it could be based on the ‘theoretical sophistication of the former [CSR] and the practical contribution that the latter [systems thinking] can make’ (Galliers et al., 1997, p. 273) (brackets added), it is necessary to be ready to swap roles, so that CSR can also become a practical way of operationalizing the claims made by systems thinking about organizations and ‘bigger systems’. CSR appears to have developed this theoretical notion already (Hawkins, 2006), whilst systems thinking is becoming
increasingly an ‘administrative’ tool for enabling people managing the complexity of the world around them (Chapman, 2002). Dialogue between those advocating one or the other should be conducted at all levels (theoretically, practically).

To this end, we present in this special issue an intriguing collection of papers that explore CSR, considering a systems perspective. We start by a critical review of the history of CSR. Ochoa-Arias presents two interpretative contexts for CSR, one of which can open the door for organization and community-oriented learning as a way to ‘go back to basics’ in terms of social responsibilities in a society. This helps setting the limits and possibilities of CSR. Some of these are confirmed by Maclagan who in his paper proposes a participative process that includes all the stakeholders affected by, or having an interest in, specific organizations’ actions as driven by moral claims. These two papers lay out the ‘terrain’ for thinking and acting about CSR.

The next two papers (Reynolds and Porter) suggest ways in which systems methodologies can help people operate in such terrain. Reynolds proposes a triadic tool to help dealing with ethical dilemmas; inspired on critical systems heuristics (CSH), Reynolds suggests a dialogic conversation to deal with these dilemmas. Porter takes on two different approaches (interpretive and complex adaptive systems ones) to support the process of dealing with intentions to put CSR in practice via sustainability. Sustainability can then become a vehicle to foster dialogue about CSR, and in this regard there is a common ground that systems thinking and CSR experts could explore together.

Maon, Lindgreen and Swaen integrate systems thinking, CSR and organizational interpretation theories to provide a conceptual framework to highlight how CSR issues emerge, get prioritized and become integrated into organizational goals. This is also a response to the critique raised by the previous papers of this special issue in relation to the ‘hierarchically organized’ process of CSR that we often see in organizations. The responses also speak about the challenges that those involved in organizations will have to face if CSR is to live up to expectations. These challenges should also be addressed in business education, and some answers should also be provided with the help of systemic thinking. The learning and teaching challenges inherent in CSR are addressed by Córdoba and Campbell’s paper who reflect on the use of systems methodologies to develop business students’ awareness and intervention skills on CSR issues. The paper concludes by suggesting the importance of fostering individual reflection and ethically driven decision making to support the use of frameworks and models.

The ground is then set to make the best of this dialogue between systems and CSR, with a variety of tools, frameworks, claims and ideas, and also to continue it whenever possible in theory and practice. We would like to thank all the people who showed interest and contributed to this special issue, and we hope that the papers selected will provoke thought and further enquiry on how systems thinking can enhance the understanding and practice of CSR, and vice versa.

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(Guest Editors)

REFERENCES


