

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS IN THE BUSINESS AND SOCIETY DEBATE

Guest Editors

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Many examples can illustrate the involvement of governments in social and environmental issues that companies are dealing with. We can easily recall that President Obama went to observe in person the disastrous impact from the BP incident in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. We also saw that in response to the recent financial crisis, government officials elaborated on the Basel III capital requirements and on new monitoring rules for financial institutions. And when it comes to global warming, numerous international conferences and treaties have been devoted to address this issue. In fact, all these examples of governmental involvement in the business and society debate are related to issues with a significant impact on society or humanity as a whole, where government officials act in their role of market regulators.

In addition to their regulating role, public organizations should be exemplary to society and proactively embrace the principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In this context, we could observe that the public port authorities (e.g. Port of Antwerp, Port of Rotterdam) readily engage in sustainability programs, addressing issues such as renewable energy, air quality management, water management, waste management, and stakeholder dialogue. Operating in a very competitive setting, ports consider sustainability as a source of competitive advantage. On the other hand, public organizations operating in less competitive environments (e.g. government administration) may not be exemplary in addressing issues

related to gender, diversity, and telework adoption and promotion. In fact, the above examples show us that at different levels, the roles and commitments of government organizations may strongly vary with respect to CSR.

With this special issue, we would like to encourage a broader spectrum of insights into the role of governments in the business and society debate. Here governments are not only seen as regulators or facilitators, but also as actors and organizations that should embrace the principles of social responsibility in their codes of conduct, as role models and as one of the key stakeholders that can contribute to solve both social and environmental challenges. Moreover, public organizations have the opportunity to embed the principles of CSR in the diversity of Public-Private-Collaborations they have with private organizations.

In the first place, business and society scholars would correctly question if government officials are supposed to act as regulators in corporate social responsibility and performance. A strict interpretation of the literature would immediately point at the principle of voluntarism, according to which CSR refers to discretionary business activities that reach beyond the legal prescription of law. Such a principle would automatically exclude the active involvement of governments from many topics of the business and society debate. However, this exclusion is not what empirics show us. In Europe, for example, a great part of the business and society debate is stimulated by public governance. Moreover, a full exclusion of governments from CSR discourse might be even undesirable from a moral standpoint. We refer here to the empirical evidence of window dressing and green washing, when businesses engage in corporate social responsibility, and we question whether governments cannot regulate for this type of misconduct. And what is the role of government in situations where managers refuse to take responsibility, even if their companies obviously caused or show a high risk of causing a social or environmental disaster. Overall, the discussion on the extent to which governments should (or should not) be involved as market regulators in the business and society debate would strengthen the theoretical fundamentals of our research field.

In addition, a holistic approach is arguably preferable to address social and environmental issues, due to the high level of complexity associated with them. In such an approach, each market player and market influencer acts according to the higher principles of morality and in the best interest for society and the natural environment. Consumers, producers, service providers, scientists, in fact all human beings can contribute to the solution of the social and environmental problems of our societies. Most effective solutions are expected when each market player makes the best effort in search of collaborative solutions to these issues. But such an orchestrated, holistic approach to social and environmental issues is not self explanatory. Due to the complexity of some issues in our societies, many people are not able to see the causal link between their conduct and the issue itself. And even when the causality is quite clear, phenomena such as the free riding problem and the “Not in My Back Yard” (NIMBY) syndrome make the holistic approach challenging. The challenges become even bigger, once a holistic action is required internationally, for which a painful example is the very slow progressing in the global warming discussion. In this context, the inquiry on the role of governments in the holistic approach to social and environmental issues will contribute to the effectiveness of these issues’ solution.

Here, public governance should be considered also as an instrument for the *organization* of social activity. To that end, all sorts of public organizations and institutions are established such as parliament, government, justice, police, defense, municipality, education, health care, and transport, to mention only a few. Regardless of their function and some differences in these functions over different countries, public organizations have an exemplary role in our societies. And depending on their specific role, public organizations and institutions are well positioned to develop one or more of the moral norms that our societies like to cherish. As such, they should be the first to adopt the principles of social responsibility in their code of conduct. Unfortunately, the numerous examples of corruption or abuse of official power suggest that public organizations might not be any different from business

organizations when it comes to involvement in window dressing or green washing. Moreover, governmental action (e.g. protectionism) might be even counterproductive to the solution of social and environmental issues. Therefore, it would be interesting to have a better understanding on the similarities or differences concerning the challenges to adopt the principles of social responsibility in public organizations as opposed to private firms.

This special issue is devoted to research on the role of governments in a holistic approach to the solution of social and environmental problems. We encourage research that elaborates on, but is not limited to, the following questions:

- Does the principle of voluntarism per definition exclude public policy regulation to any aspect of corporate social performance?
- If not, to what extent is CSR regulation desirable?
- What are the positive or negative effects of public regulation of corporate social responsibility and performance?
- In addition to regulation, what other roles can governments/institutions play in the business and society debate?
- How can different governmental organizations – at the local, national or international level – contribute to the business and society debate?
- How can government action contribute to the holistic solution of social and environmental problems?
- What instruments may public organizations use to involve different stakeholders in holistic approach to solving social and environmental issues?
- How can countries with different levels of development or with different sovereign interests co-operate to face the challenges of our planet?
- How do public organizations contribute to setting the moral norms of society?
- What is the exemplary role of public organizations in social responsibility?

- How similar (different) are the challenges to adopt the principles of social responsibility in public organizations as opposed to private firms?
- Does the core function of public organizations limit the issues of social responsibility it may want to address, and the way it can address it?
- What are the opportunities and the challenges of introducing the principles of social responsibility in public-private collaborations?

This special issue welcomes papers with theoretical and/or empirical contribution to the better understanding how governments, institutions or public organizations specifically can contribute to the advancement of the business and society debate. We welcome scholarly inquiries based on a broad variety of disciplines, e.g. political theory, law, sociology, organization theory, management science, environmental studies, ethics, corporate social performance (CSP), and stakeholder management, etc. Papers submitted for publication in this special issue are subject to the double-blind review process of *Business & Society*.

Submission Instructions

Authors are requested to submit a full paper to the corresponding guest editor, Nikolay Dentchev (nikolay.dentchev@gmail.com) before 15 November 2011. Submitted papers should follow the *Business & Society* guidelines for authors (cf. <http://bas.sagepub.com>).

Submission should include an abstract of 100-150 words, followed by 3 to 5 keywords. The manuscript should not contain any indication of authorship and should be submitted separately from the title page with full author information for contact. *Business & Society* uses the citation and reference system of the American Psychological Association (APA) and any paper published in *Business & Society* can be taken as an example.

Timeline and deadlines

We would like to stimulate the debate on the role of government in the business and society discourse during the following events, although participation is not a condition for authors to submit a contribution:

- 23-26 June 2011 : Workshop at the annual IABS conference in Bath, UK. Abstracts (ca. 4 pages) for workshop participation should be submitted to nikolay.dentchev@gmail.com before 25 February 2011.
- 14 September 2011 : Seminar organized by the guest editors in Brussels, Belgium. Drafted papers should be submitted to nikolay.dentchev@gmail.com before 25 July 2011.

Target dates (subject to change):

- 15 November 2011 : full paper submission to the special issue.
- 1 April 2012 : authors are invited to revise and resubmit
- 1 June 2012 : submission of revised papers
- 15 October 2012 : Delivery of contributions together with the introductory paper by the guest editors.
- 2013 : publication of the special issue

For further details, please contact the corresponding guest editor:

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