

## Corporate Social Responsibility, Benefits beyond Legitimacy: A Symbiotic Framework

**Abstract.** The 21st-century social and political environment has continued to evolve and heightens the demand for organisations to provide accountability for the sustainability operations of their businesses. Accordingly, organisations are committing to diverse strategic efforts to provide disclosures on their social and environmental actions to the society and environment where they operate. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has received support and criticism since its emergence in the corporate realm. This paper aims to portray CSR as beyond mere symbolic legitimacy and propose a corporate-society symbiotic existential framework. The research approach is a critical literature analysis and conceptual framework development. The results show that the corporate and the society co-exist in a reciprocal relationship. Thus, the implication is that some CSR may be more than symbolic legitimacy with potential benefits derivable from committed transparent and pragmatic CSR, which can encourage companies to shift away from symbolic CSR tendencies. The paper recommends the need for organisations to operationalise CSR practices and policy as this has a propensity to enhance corporate legitimate standing, which will assist in reducing business risks and enhance the potential for profit in the long run. In addition, this discourse may be helpful for business schools in their academic studies about CSR and legitimacy theory and would also assist in CSR regulatory initiatives. The value of the paper hinges on the proposed novel framework for corporate-society symbiotic existence, which provides an agenda for future research study and expansion therein. This framework may lead to multiples of modelling in future CSR and corporate governance studies and may also assist in narrowing the gap between legal and normative CSR.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, legal CSR, normative CSR, beyond legitimacy, symbiotic existence, legitimacy theory.

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## Корпоративна соціальна відповідальність, переваги за межами легітимності: симбіотична структура

**Анотація.** Соціальне та політичне середовище 21-го століття продовжує розвиватися та підвищує вимоги до організацій щодо підзвітності у сфері сталого розвитку. Відповідно, організації зобов'язуються докласти різноманітних стратегічних зусиль, щоб розкривати перед суспільством інформацію про свої соціальні та екологічні дії в середовищі, де вони працюють. Корпоративна соціальна відповідальність (КСВ) отримала підтримку та критику з моменту її появи в сфері корпоративного управління. Ця дослідження має на меті представити КСВ як щось таке, що виходить за межі простої символічної легітимності, і запропонувати симбіотичний екзистенціальний каркас взаємовідносин між корпораціями і суспільством. Дослідницький підхід полягає в критичному аналізі літератури та розробці концептуальної основи. Результати показують, що корпорація та суспільство співіснують у взаємних стосунках. Таким чином, мається на увазі, що деяка КСВ може бути більш ніж символічною легітимністю з потенційними вигодами, отриманими від відданої прозорості та прагматичної КСВ, яка може спонукати компанії відійти від символічних тенденцій. У статті рекомендовано організаціям ввести в дію практику та політику КСВ, оскільки це має тенденцію до посилення корпоративного законного статусу, що допоможе зменшити бізнес-ризик та підвищить потенціал прибутку в довгостроковій перспективі. Крім того, цей дискурс може бути корисним для бізнес-циклу у їхніх академічних

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дослідженнях та теорії легітимності, а також допоможе в ініціативах щодо регулювання КСВ. Оригінальність дослідження полягає в тому, що автором запропоновано нову основу симбіотичного існування між корпорацією та суспільством, яка забезпечує порядок денний для майбутніх досліджень та їх розширення. Ця структура може призвести до багаторазового моделювання в майбутніх дослідженнях корпоративного управління, а також може допомогти зменшити розрив між правовою та нормативною КСВ.

**Ключові слова:** корпоративна соціальна відповідальність, правова КСВ, нормативна КСВ, переваги поза легітимністю, симбіотичне існування, теорія легітимності.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility is an amalgam of business practices, including social and environmental proclivities that enhance improved social and environmental conditions of the business community and environment. When all is said and done, whether it is legal or normative corporate social responsibility, a somewhat contestable issue is that the fundamental aim of establishing the business enterprise is to make a profit (Alberti & Varon Garrido, 2017). Accordingly, the corporation will pursue those activities and/or responsibilities (be they legal or normative) that it considers pivotal to achieving the ultimate corporate goal (either in the short or long run) – these activities include, among other things, CSR.

Perhaps it might be very appropriate to begin this brief discourse on corporate social responsibility by recalling the famous Milton Friedman's essay popularised as “The Friedman's Doctrine” – with its renowned verses, which include, amongst others, “the one and only one” verse in the following excerpt:

*“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 is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud”* (Friedman, 1970, p. 8).

Friedman's doctrine has sparked numerous debates since its publication in the New York Times in 1970. One striking characteristic of the diverse debates is that both the critics of the doctrine and supporters agree at a point in time that the business enterprise ought to make a profit. The most binding form of CSR is the legal CSR – as an instance, the tax obligation, yet the corporation must make a profit before paying any tax obligation; the tax obligation can be seen in the balance sheet row item (profit before taxation) (Ponnu & Okoth, 2009). Rationally, any form of social responsibility may be contingent upon the availability of the means to service the social responsibility; for the business enterprise, the means to engage in CSR is through profit. Hence, similar to the tax obligation example, the business may be said to violate its social responsibility only if it makes enough profit and refuses to attend to its social contract.

Some literature has criticised the burgeoning corporate social responsibility aphorism as an apparent legitimacy strategy, as some companies may be lacking in proven, pragmatic commitment to justify the rhetorical disclosures of social responsibility (Machado et al., 2021). The uncertainty regarding whether companies live their numerous social responsibility claims has led to the concept of greenwashing, which describes some fictitious corporate green claims that lack authenticity in green

practices (Balluchi et al., 2020). Even though corporate social responsibility is a widely applied concept, which is interpreted and used in different perspectives by different companies, the fundamental purpose of corporate social responsibility is to conduct business operations within socially acceptable norms, in an environmentally sustainability ambit and yet economically (CFI, 2023).

The 21st-century social and political environment has continued to evolve and heightens the demand for organisations to provide accountability for the sustainability operations of their businesses. Therefore, given society and all corporate stakeholders' demand to be socially responsible, businesses are committing an enormous amount of time and space to report significantly on their social and environmental practices. This show of adherence to social responsibility is a strong recognition on the part of business that the voice of stakeholders matters for the sustained operations and profitability of business in a constantly growing climate-conscious business environment. Consciousness about humans, the interconnectedness between a healthy environment of business, healthy communities, and healthy products and services provided by business continues to suffuse the entire political, social, economic and wider consumerism system. The diverse sustainability awareness provided by both government and non-government organisations may not cease as the entire global community yearns for a safer environment that guarantees their present survival and the survival of future generations. The yearning also pervades the survival of fauna and flora that provide natural remedies and fresh air to humans and, hence, the entire ecosystem's intertwined existence and symbiotic relationship (Ellouze et al., 2008).

Accordingly, corporate social responsibility is intricately entwined with the entire advocacy for a greener climate – either through pollution avoidance, remediation, adaptation and/or mitigation actions and responsibilities.

Accordingly, this report may have slanted more toward the external environment as some organisations see robust social responsibility reports as an avenue of seeking society's legitimacy as an ethical company. However, there is no gainsaying that some companies may have been pragmatically committed to credible social responsibility behaviour rather than mere rhetoric. This commitment by the corporation stems from the fact that (amongst other reasons) the corporation has recognised that being socially responsible begets an assortment of benefits to the organisation.

Therefore, there is a symbiotic relationship between the company and society when society positively patronizes a company that takes care of society, which

thus begets some revenue for the corporation in satisfaction of the objectives of the firm. Thus, it can be said that a pragmatic corporate social responsibility by the corporate is a give-and-take survival strategy. *Ceteris paribus*, the society will give back to the company that gives to society – hence, a symbiotic and cyclical

relationship exists between the business and society – which may contribute to a sustainable business environment that both the business and society yearn for. A schematic symbiotic relationship can be visualised in Figure 1.



Figure 1. A cyclical symbiotic relationship between the corporation and society

Source: author's vision.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Within the time of Friedman's doctrine of the 1970s, the focal contention about social responsibility then revolved around a fundamental point, namely what the corporation owes society; little attention was paid to a corollary inquiry, such as what the corporation benefits from corporate social responsibility. This paper aims to weave these opposing ends of the question and, in the end, to propose a framework. Therefore, the key objective of this paper is to examine the potential benefits of corporate social responsibility and, in doing so, to highlight that CSR may be more than mere symbolic legitimacy; there can be benefits derivable from committed transparent and pragmatic CSR, and this can encourage companies to shift away from any symbolic CSR tendency as the gains implicit from transparent CSR may be long-lasting for the business enterprise. Hence, in the end, the paper's sub-objective is to propose the framework, namely the corporate-society symbiotic existential framework. The framework provides a picture of corporate symbiotic benefits to and from society, which thus elevates CSR beyond mere symbolic legitimacy. Rather, CSR can be pivotal to a mutual and sustained co-existence between the corporate and society.

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper is conceptual and inclines on legitimacy theory. Its methodological slant is on the development of a conceptual framework "corporate-society symbiotic existence framework". In formulating the framework, the paper relies on critical analysis of extant literature to untangle and sieve out important contentious issues embedded in the somewhat buzz word "corporate social responsibility". The author tries to reinforce that although criticisms exist regarding the legitimacy demeanour of some corporate regarding CSR, but there is a reason to believe that some corporate do engage in pragmatic CSR as part of corporate strategy (Szöcs et al, 2020).

## 4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Emergence of Corporate Social Responsibility – a Brief

There are many diverse opinions in the scholarly accounts regarding the emergence of CSR; some point to the bracket between 1900 and 1960 (Heald, 1970). Others narrate CSR events between 1800 – 1914 (Husted, 2015); Crane et al. (2008) indicate it came into the mind of business around the 1940s. Wells (2002) points to the burgeoning around the 1920s emanating from the need to grow the American economy.

*"It has to be said, there is no shortage of history to dwell on in the debate about CSR even if those who write about the subject rarely acknowledge as much"* (Crane et al., 2008, p. 4).

The concept of CSR has come of age and has metamorphosed from philanthropism to a sine qua non for business success (ACCP, 2023). The contemporary corporate social responsibility movement is rooted in corporate philanthropy traceable back to Andrew Carnegie – an affluent businessman who persuaded affluent people to support social needs, a movement he popularised in his "Gospel of Wealth". Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth inspired another affluent man, John D Rockefeller, who followed in the footsteps of Carnegie by donating more than half a million dollars (ACCP, 2023; Carnegie, 2022). This was developed more through the founding of the Cleveland Foundation in 1914 by Frederick Goff – a then-renowned Cleveland banker who innovated philanthropy and thus provided the first known community foundation in Cleveland. The foundation collected gifts from several donors on behalf of the community. It was able to assess diverse needs and, after that, provide relevant responses to the different needs of the community (ACCP, 2023).

#### 4.2 Is CSR a Mere Symbolic Legitimacy?

The legitimacy theory asserts that the business has a social contract (even if unwritten) between the business and community expectations. On the one hand, if the business operations, activities, or services comply with the community expectations, the business gains corporate legitimacy in the community's perception. On the other hand, if the community perceives the company as in violation of the social contract, it creates an existential threat because the community may rescind the social contract, which may make it difficult for the business to operate within the community (Rochayatun & Kholifah, 2021; AI, 2020; Nurhayati et al., 2016). The idea of fabricated CSR reporting has emerged in the scholarly literature. Companies may publish phoney social responsibility reports to attract legitimacy whilst lacking committed, transparent social responsibility. Based on some criticisms about legitimacy and greenwashing, One may wonder if ubiquitous greenwashing and/or rhetoric about CSR may completely mean that CSR is a mere legitimacy. The answer is somewhere on a continuum between profit motive and social concern. This is not the case; despite some existence of symbolic, phoney and/or greenwashing CSR reporting, scholars concur on transparent CSR. In this regard, Mahmud (2019) provides the following balanced summary regarding issue of CSR and legitimacy, which underscores the key aim of this current paper:

*“To various researchers from business and economics, the idea of gaining organizational legitimacy triggers firms to publish Corporate Social Reporting (CSR). It is found that most organizations pursue only symbolic management of their legitimacy and publish fabricated CSRs. However, some organizations with a true sustainability approach offer transparent information and adopt substantive legitimacy management. Therefore, sweeping conclusions derived from legitimacy theory would not be wise”* (Mahmud, 2019, p. 1).

#### 4.3 Are There Benefits from CSR?

Friedman's (1970) doctrine may evade some known criticism if his doctrine is positively viewed and further put under a positive discussion and semantic analysis. This thought arises because his doctrine's catchphrase, “The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits” (Friedman, 1970, p. 1), has garnered levels of truism as scholars have, through credible empirical research findings, proved that corporate social responsibility increases profit and/or finances of the business enterprises that engage in social responsibility. Granted that Friedman may have had other purposes in mind for his doctrine, but when viewed deeply based on practical reality arising from business engagement in social responsibility and the concomitant gains therefrom, some of the criticisms of Friedman's doctrine could be toned down.

Numerous empirical research findings have uncovered that corporate social responsibility begets (amongst others) the following for the business: positive image and good reputation, cost reduction, improved profitability, increased market share, low cost of capital,

good relationship with the business community, government recognition, etcetera. Accordingly, scholars have avowed that CSR fosters a good corporate reputation, and others concur that CSR is a veritable recipe for building a good reputation (Carlisle et al., 2005; Brammer & Payelin, 2004). Rhou and Singal (2020) found a significant reduction in the cost of operations for firms that engage in environmental-related aspects of CSR, such as energy conservation. Cost reduction is also reported in fashion companies that engage in effective CSR (Perry & Towers, 2013). In their study of value-enhancing capacity implicit in corporate social responsibility, some scholars have recorded improved profit derivable from CSR (Malik, 2015; Asemah et al., 2013). Khan and Majid (2013) highlight that CSR significantly affects market share and profitability. This is corroborated by Enderle and Tavis (1998), who opine that consumers' perceptions regarding CSR deficits in a company may be very damaging to a business's capacity to make a profit and retain or improve its market share (Enderle & Tavis, 1998). Corporate engagement in committed corporate social responsibility improves and maintains good corporate relationships with the community (Siregar, 2021). Corporate social responsibility provides a measure of national government recognition and attracts international recognition of the company that engages in selfless CSR (Cao et al., 2015; Hemphill, 2013). Low cost of capital is reported by previous research in firms that practice CSR; for instance, El Ghouli et al. (2011) found that firms with enhanced corporate social responsibility scores experience a significant reduction in cost of capital. Furthermore, Harjoto and Jo (2015) concur that legal CSR reduces the cost of capital and increases corporate value. Whilst the normative genre of corporate social responsibility may refer to what the corporation ought to do to society to remain a legitimate corporate citizen, legal CSR connotes the aspects of CSR that are legally mandatory for the company – a typical example is the corporate tax responsibility, and health and safety of workers. Hence, prior research findings indicate that a strong judiciary helps bring some CSR aspects within legal ambits such that the corporation becomes legally bound. Although legally bound, good compliance bestows aspects of CSR's good image on the compliant companies (Harjoto and Jo, 2015).

Overall, M. (2015) formulated a summary of the value capabilities of CSR as follows:

*“Protecting different stakeholder interests results in different benefits, such as product market benefits (loyal customers, product diversification, extended market share, and the creation of brand equity), capital market benefits (increased market returns, lowered cost of capital, and decreased information asymmetry & risk), employee benefits (increased employee morale, job satisfaction, and employee productivity), regulatory benefits (reduced litigation costs, positive media coverage, and favourable treatment from regulators), and operational benefits (better managerial skills, enhanced operating efficiency, improved corporate branding, and reputation). All these benefits derived by superior quality*

CSR performance help improve firms' profitability and economic value both in the short and long-run" (Malik, 2015, p. 426).

Based on the preceding discussions, it becomes clear to decipher that there are benefits beyond mere symbolic shows of CSR. When the corporation invests transparently in society, society gives back in return to the corporate existence, which thus assists in actualising the ultimate objective of the firm. Accordingly, the paper proposes an original framework titled "corporate-society symbiotic existence", the author conjectures that none of

the entities – society or the corporate may exist exclusively without each other. Therefore, the symbiotic give-and-take and existential relationship is presented in Figure 2. Future researchers may add and/or modify the framework. It also provides a ground for quantitative modelling using the variables on each side of the symbiotic relationship; hence, many models may emerge when subjected to quantitative CSR. The relationship in Figure 1 may also lead to many models of logical and philosophical extension of this discourse, such as relating it to aspects of legal CSR and aspects of normative CSR.

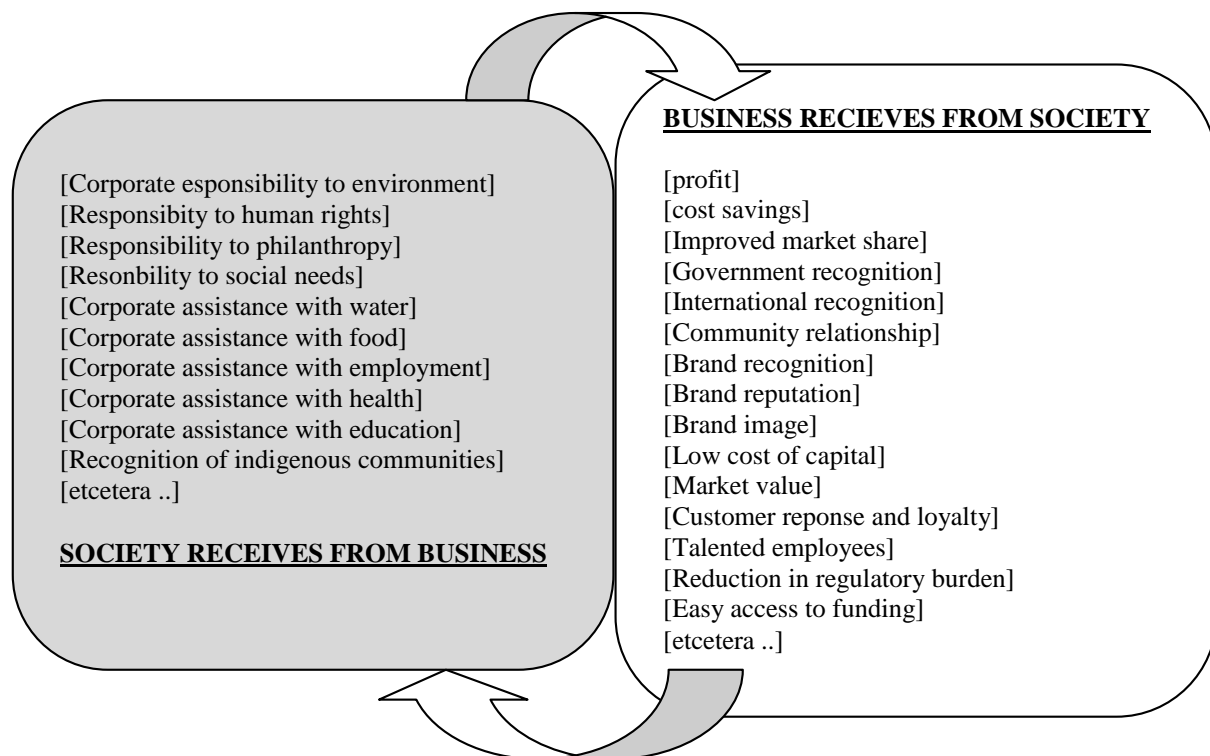


Figure 2. A Framework for Corporate-society Symbiotic Existence

Source: author's framework with contents sourced from various literature.

### 5. IMPLICATIONS

This paper highlights that whilst phoney CSR may exist, but CSR may be more than mere symbolic legitimacy; there can be benefits derivable from committed transparent and pragmatic CSR, and this can encourage companies to shift away from any symbolic CSR tendency as the gains implicit from transparent CSR may be long-lasting for the business enterprise. This discourse may be helpful for business schools in their academic studies about CSR and legitimacy theory.

The paper proposes an original framework for corporate-society symbiotic existence, providing an agenda for future research study and expansion. This framework may lead to multiples of quantitative CSR and corporate governance modelling.

### 6. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to evaluate the literature to submit that corporate social responsibility may exist beyond mere symbolic legitimacy and that committed CSR may

benefit the business enterprise. Based on the literature, the paper deciphers that a corporation and society exist in a symbiotic existential relationship. The society supports a business that cares for the interest of the society, which translates to profit. Accordingly, business enterprises' pragmatic corporate social responsibility may be analogous to a give-and-take survival strategy. Therefore, in the ceteris paribus, society will give back to the business that gives to society.

Hence, the paper proposes a symbiotic relationship framework that exists between the business and society. The paper recommends the need for organisations to operationalise CSR practices and policy as this has a propensity to enhance corporate legitimate standing, which will assist in reducing business risks and enhance the potential for profit in the long run. The paper also provides an agenda for further research to explore the application of the proposed corporate-society symbiotic existence framework.

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