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## **Getting a grip: a critical systems framework for corporate responsibility**

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### **Abstract**

Three dilemmas of corporate social responsibility (CSR) are described in relation to a proposed triadic critical systems framework based on boundary critique. One, the holistic dilemma of addressing triple bottom line interests in economic, social and environmental issues. This speaks to a 'framework for understanding' in making sense of interrelationships between entities in a complex reality ('getting real'). Two, the dilemma of nurturing cooperation amongst stakeholders having diverse viewpoints. This speaks to a 'framework for practice' in fostering engagement between multiple perspectives based on different boundaries ('getting it right'). A third dilemma of CSR is presented in terms of 'getting a grip' - a concern that speaks to a 'framework for responsibility' in addressing the moral dilemma that any methodology, approach, system or framework can neither be entirely holistic nor appropriately conversant with all perspectives. With this caveat in mind, the paper examines one particularly significant systems tool for addressing CSR dilemmas - critical systems heuristics (CSH). Applying the triadic framework, the potential value of CSH for CSR is surfaced from two contrasting perspectives - the CSR advocate and the CSR adversary.

Keywords: boundary critique; critical systems; CSH; CSR; systems thinking

### **Introduction**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has acquired considerable currency as a moral imperative since its inception in the early 1970s, particularly with the extension of moral concern from 'shareholders' to 'stakeholders' as an accepted lingua-franca of business language since the late 1980s (Tepper-Marlin and Tepper-Marlin 2003). In more recent years the moral community has extended further still to include non-human nature, exemplified with the frequent dropping of the 'social' from CSR (exemplified in the title of this paper). With this widening of the moral community to which corporate bodies claim responsibility, particular dilemmas around CSR have come into prominence.

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Three central dilemmas of CSR are mapped out and explored in relation to traditions of systems thinking. A critical systems framework is then proposed to help identify what CSR might realistically promise. Significantly, the framework also reveals what CSR simply cannot deliver or, more importantly, be allowed to pretend to deliver. This is illustrated with reference to a proposed systems tool for CSR – critical systems heuristics - and its value in framing CSR from two contrasting perspectives.

### ***CSR dilemmas and systems thinking***

"CSR is a company's commitment to operating in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner whilst balancing the interests of diverse stakeholders."<sup>2</sup>

This succinct definition provided by CSR Asia, one of the most active and extensive networks of its kind, speaks of two widely accepted dilemmas of CSR. First, the extensive range of responsibilities to which a corporate organisation must address, encapsulated in what Elkington (1998) calls the triple bottom line – companies being responsive not just to financial/economic interests, but to society, and 'the environment'. For the purpose of this discussion I shall use the term 'ecology' referring specifically to natural biophysical factors rather than 'the environment'. This avoids confusion with the systems tradition in referring 'environment' to all factors - social, economic and ecological - *outside* the control of a specified system. The dilemma is how might any system like an organization possibly take into account and be responsible for the infinite scope of complex interrelationships? In short, to what might CSR be responsible?

A second dilemma concerns the multitude of perspectives on these interrelationships and the role of corporate activity. Different stakeholders will have different perspectives on what the reality of corporate activity is about (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Doh and Guay 2006). Customers, shareholders and corporate workers may have very different views on the corporate enterprise in which they are involved, let alone the multiple views of other stakeholders who may otherwise be affected by corporate activity (Achterkamp and Vos 2007). This second dilemma raises the question of how respect might be given to multiple perspectives? In short, to whom is CSR responsible and how is it enacted?

A third dilemma can be brutally stated. In short - given the clear difficulties associated with the first two dilemmas - why do it? Is it a genuine attempt to be responsible or to be seen to be responsible? Joel Bakan in a debate with Tom Burke makes the point that companies by their very nature have a prime responsibility to make money for its shareholders (Burke and Baken 2005). Any other declared responsibilities – whether to society or the environment - must be viewed as subservient to profit. Thus Baken quotes a high profile corporate chief executive saying that CSR is "not [an] act of charity but what could be called enlightened self-interest" (ibid. p.28). CSR might be helpful, claims Baken, if considered *transparently* as part of an overall strategic plan of the company showing priority of interest to their *shareholders*. But Baken further suggests that when reports are considered as providing some benevolent sense of *a priori* social responsibility as an

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.csr-asia.com/index.php> accessed 3 April 2008

end in itself they are actually providing a false sense of legitimacy for corporate deregulation; arguing that companies be ultimately trusted to regulate themselves. The dilemma here is therefore one of legitimacy; why should CSR be taken as a legitimate activity?

The three dilemmas of CSR can be paraphrased successively in terms of 'getting real', 'getting it right', and 'getting a grip'. They relate to three principles of contemporary systems thinking. The first two can be associated with a simple distinction made by Jake Chapman:

“The core aspects of systems thinking are gaining a bigger picture (going up a level of abstraction) and appreciating other people’s perspectives” (Chapman 2004 p. 14)

Chapman builds on a distinction made by Richard Bawden (1998) in identifying two transitions in systems thinking; one, towards holism, and another towards pluralism. First is the principle of holistic interconnectedness - everything relates to each other – hence the need for 'joined-up-thinking'. Systems ideas in this tradition include expressions of first order cybernetics such as the viable systems model underpinning *The Brain of the Firm* (Beer 1972), and systems dynamics underpinning *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.* 1972), and 'systems thinking' in *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge 1990). The holistic principle is ontological; a statement about real world interconnectedness and feedback.

Second, is the constructivist principle based on the epistemological notion of systems as conceptual constructs used for developing knowledge about reality as well as guiding our activities in reshaping reality – serving the need for making new realities. Systems ideas in this tradition include second-order cybernetics such as *autopoiesis* (Maturana and Varela 1980) and a range of *problem-structuring methods* including soft systems methodology, cognitive mapping and others (Rosenhead and Mingers 2001). Such works raise important questions regarding how to respond to multiple stakeholder perspectives or, as Maturana puts it, how to practice being epistemologically 'multiverse', as distinct from assuming access to some ontological 'universe' (or multiple ontological universes, as with a scientific meaning of multiverse) (Maturana and Poerksen 2004 p.38).

The relative emphases of ontological and epistemological traditions can be appreciated in the distinction made by Cabrera *et al* (2008) between 'thinking about systems' (e.g., ecosystems, health systems, legal systems etc.) and 'systems thinking'. Systems thinking is an active cognitive endeavour, with systems conceived as conceptual epistemological constructs, most closely aligned with a soft systems tradition. A third critical systems tradition deals with the methodological limitations and inevitable problems of selectivity in thinking holistically and interconnectedly, and being pluralistically multiverse. This relates to the third dilemma of CSR – that is, CSR legitimacy – prompting questions concerning the boundaries of any activity. Critical systems thinking (CST) is an umbrella term used in association with this third tradition. Whilst CST has several contested expressions (Ulrich 2003; Jackson 2003) for the purposes of this paper, and building on earlier work (Reynolds 2006; 2007a; 2008) I offer my own definition of CST based more on Ulrich's work in terms of a critical systems framework.

## ***Critical systems framework for CSR***

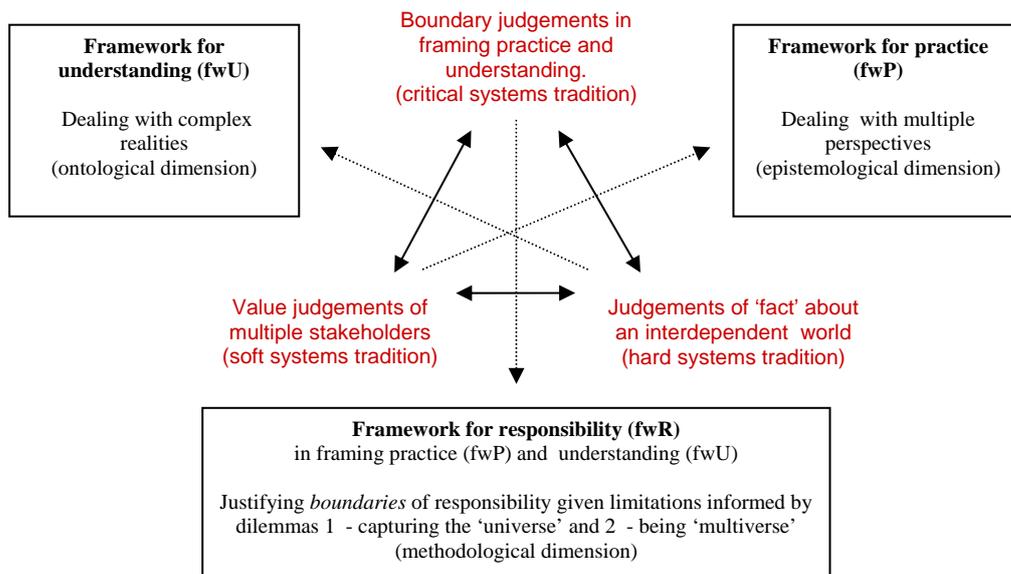
A critical systems framework constitutes three distinct though interrelated (sub)frameworks: firstly, a framework for understanding (fwU) complex interrelationships and interdependencies; secondly, a framework for practice (fwP) when engaging with different perspectives; and thirdly, a composite framework for responsibility (fwR) in dealing ethically with inevitable limitations on being holistically 'universe' and pluralistically 'multiverse'. The triadic critical systems framework is an expression of boundary critique (Ulrich, 2003) - an eternal triangle of interplay between judgements of 'fact', value judgements, and boundary judgements:

“Thinking through the triangle means to consider each of its corners in the light of the other two. For example, what new facts become relevant if we expand the boundaries of the reference system or modify our value judgments? How do our valuations look if we consider new facts that refer to a modified reference system? In what way may our reference system fail to do justice to the perspective of different stakeholder groups? Any claim that does not reflect on the underpinning 'triangle' of boundary judgments, judgments of facts, and value judgments, risks claiming too much, by not disclosing its built-in selectivity” (Ulrich 2003 p.334)

Each corner of the triangle might itself be associated with a type of reference system: fwU for the ontological world of 'facts'; fwP for the epistemological world of perspectives; and fwR for the methodological world of ethics - doing 'good', doing 'right', and being responsible.

Figure 1 illustrates the critical systems framework. The triadicity signals both the dynamic interplay between the three systems traditions, and a corresponding interplay between three dimensions of a systems intervention: the ontological, epistemological and methodological.

**Figure 1** Critical systems framework

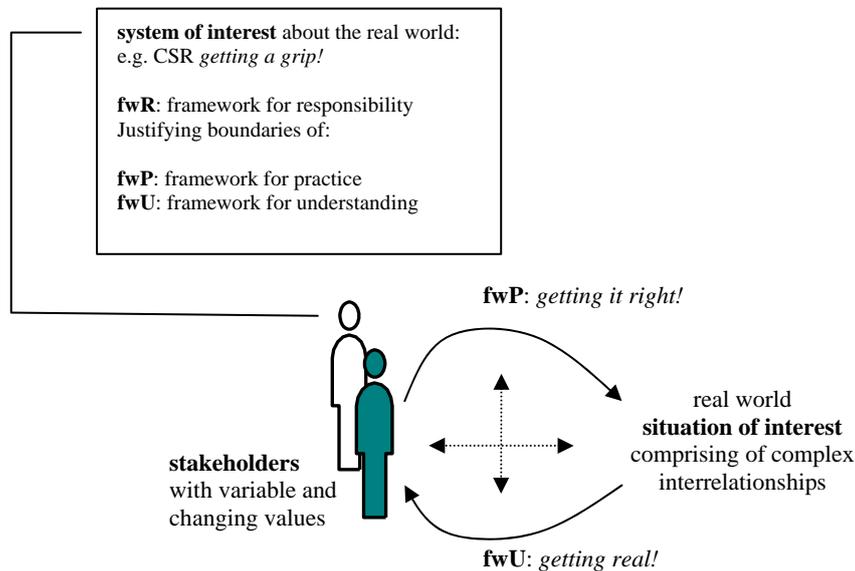


The three frameworks can be regarded as systems for addressing CSR dilemmas. The fwU provides a system for 'getting real' – translating complex realities into manageable systems. The fwP provides a system for 'getting it right' – enabling multiple perspectives to engage with constructing better systems. The fwR provides a system for 'getting a grip' – responsibly coming to terms with inevitable incomplete Understanding and inadequate Practice.

### ***CSR and critical systems: responsibility as 'conversation'***

A critical systems framework is in itself not a methodology but rather a guide to intervention couched in terms of three (sub)frameworks. Figure 2 translates the triadic framework from Figure 1 into a cycle of intervention supporting CSR. The illustration here is helpful in emphasising the constructivist notion of system and appreciating CSR as itself a system for guiding a process of continual conversation. The conversation is between *systems* – conceptual constructs (*boundary judgements* or frameworks) for understanding and practice – and *situations* – real world sites of transformation (requiring *judgements of 'fact'*), mediated by stakeholders (embodying the space for *value judgements*).

**Figure 2** Conversing between system of CSR and situational context



Two sets of tensions are evident in the conversation. One tension is between systems and situations; that is, not confusing the ‘map’ for the ‘territory’ - to use an important adage from Korzybski (1933). The other tension is between practice and understanding; a tension that elsewhere is referred to in terms of ‘social learning’ (cf. Blackmore et. al., 2007). The two dimensions of tension resonate with two dialectical processes constituent of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984): (i) between ‘abstract conceptualisation’ [systems] and ‘concrete experience’ [situations]; and (ii) between ‘active experimentation’ [practice] and ‘reflective observation’ [understanding].

Responsibility as conversation provides an overall guiding ethic which might helpfully be appreciated in terms of Response-ability (cf. Ison 2002). Response-ability relates to how well systems converse with situations, and how practice converses with understanding. More specifically, it relates to two overarching concerns in moral philosophy. One is the consequentialist (utilitarian) concern of ‘doing what’s good (not harm)’. This is addressed principally through fwU in ‘getting real’, a framework that invokes more the tension between system and situation. The other is the deontological (rights-based) concern of ‘doing what’s right (not wrong)’. This is addressed principally through fwP in ‘getting it right’, a framework that invokes more the tension between practice and understanding. The fwR guiding these moral concerns in terms of ‘getting a grip’ might be considered in terms of the simple virtue ethic - being responsible.

To summarise, from a critical systems framework perspective a system has three purposes with respect to conversing with reality: to support *understanding* of reality; to support *practice* with engaging multiple perspectives on reality; and to guide *responsibility* in changing reality. The remainder of this paper discusses one

significant tool derived from the critical systems tradition - critical systems heuristics (CSH) - developed by Werner Ulrich (1983) with the influence of West Churchman (1979). I examine its value for CSR from two perspectives using a critical systems framework. One, an optimistic perspective exemplified by Jonathan Porritt, a CSR advocate and advisor to corporate bodies. The other, an adversarial perspective, exemplified by Claire Fauset, a CSR sceptic who supports direct action against corporate activity. The paper draws on an exchange about CSR between the two protagonists (Fauset and Porritt, 2007).

## ***CSR and CSH: the role of the advocate and the adversary***

CSH as a general framework offers twelve bounded categories (Table 1). Ulrich presents CSH categories in four groups of three according to sources of influence – (1) motivation, (2) control, (3) expertise, and (4) legitimacy. They are also grouped by Ulrich as three category-sets of questions – social role, role-concerns, and key problems. In practice I have found it useful to rephrase these category sets in terms of (i) stakeholders, (ii) stakes, and (iii) stakeholdings respectively (Reynolds 2007b). *Stakes* are the core interests or concerns associated with a particular *stakeholder* group relevant to a system. *Stakeholding* conveys the idea that stakes are not residual entities but relational attributes that can be actively constructed by stakeholders as well as defended and promoted. In CSH terms stakeholding conveys a problematic tension which holds promise of development as well as the risk of intransigence for particular stakeholder groups. The phrasing of each of the four stakeholding categories in Table 1 differs from Ulrich to emphasise the tension held in each category.

Detailed descriptions of the CSH categories depicted in Table 1 and practical examples of their use in different contexts can be sought from Ulrich himself (e.g., 1983; 1987; 1996) and, amongst many others, Flood and Jackson (1991) and Reynolds (1998; 2007b). Here I want to focus more generically on the CSH categories (referred to hereafter as CSHc1, CSHc2...CSHc12) and their relation to CSR. I begin with distinguishing CSR as a system and the stakeholder roles of the two protagonists associated with CSR– the advocate and the adversary.

**Table 1 Critical systems heuristic questions as stakeholders, stakes and stakeholdings (adapted from Ulrich, 1996)**

Constituents to a generic purposeful system (S)				
<i>Sources of influence</i>	<b>Stakeholders</b> <i>Social Roles</i>	<b>Stakes</b> <i>Specific concerns</i>	<b>Stakeholdings</b> <i>Key Problems</i>	
Sources of <b>motivation</b>	1. <u>Beneficiary</u> who is the client or beneficiary of the system (S)	2. <u>Purpose</u> what is the purpose of S in terms of some improvement being sought?	3. <u>Measure of success</u> what is S's measure of , as distinct from <i>actual</i> , improvement?	The involved
Sources of <b>control</b>	4. <u>Decision maker</u> who is in command of resources necessary to enable S?	5. <u>Resources</u> what are necessary relevant components ('capital') to secure improvement?	6. <u>Decision environment</u> what conditions are relevant but <i>outside</i> the control of the decision maker?	
Sources of <b>knowledge</b>	7. <u>Expert</u> who is providing expert support for S?	8. <u>Expertise</u> what are the relevant skills and knowledge supporting S?	9. <u>Guarantor</u> what are regarded as assurances & <i>false</i> assurances of successful implementation?	
Sources of <b>legitimacy</b>	10. <u>Witness</u> who is representing the interests of those negatively affected by, but not involved with, S?	11. <u>Emancipation</u> what are the opportunities for the interests of those negatively affected to have expression and freedom from worldview of S?	12. <u>Worldviews</u> what space is available for reconciling worldview of <i>affected</i> with worldview of S?	The 'affected'

## CSR as a system of interest

From a systems viewpoint, purpose (CSHc2) might be considered the prime stake from which is derived all the stakeholder groups and their respective concerns and problems. If the system's purpose is first defined as 'to fulfil CSR', the respective roles of the advocate and the adversary might be as follows:

### 1. Role of the CSR advocate

The CSR advocate/ adviser would ideally play the role of expert (CSHc7) expected to provide expertise (CSHc 8) to ensure the success of such a system and to avoid generating false assurances (CSHc9)

### 2. Role of the CSR adversary

The CSR adversary would be considered as witness to the concerns of those affected by CSR (CSHc10). Their role is to provide a voice to those subjugated stakeholders and stakes silenced by the dominating rhetoric of CSR (CSHc11) thereby challenging the prevalent economic worldview underpinning CSR (CSHc12).

The following three sections examine the usefulness of CSH for CSR in relation to each of the three frameworks associated with a critical systems framework.

Statements from the two protagonists – Jonathon Porritt (JP) as the advocate and Claire Fauset (CF) as the adversary – are drawn from Fauset and Porritt (2007).

### ***(fwU) Getting real with the triple bottom line?***

There are two issues relating to CSH as an effective fwU for CSR. First, does the framework enable insight to the variables of a triple bottom line – social, economic, and ecological? Second, does CSH enable insight to the interrelations between the three variables?

The CSR variables of social, economic and ecological can be associated with sources of influence – motivation, control and legitimacy – respectively. Concern for the interrelations between the three variables can be associated with expertise and knowledge as a source of influence. In Tables 2 to 5 below, I align the variables with sources of influence as they might be envisioned from each of the two perspectives.

### **Social variables**

Since CSH maps out all social ‘actors’ - four stakeholder groups - and associated social ‘factors’ - the stakes and stakeholdings associated with each social group – the ‘social’ might be considered as constituent of the whole CSH framework. But sources of motivation might be regarded as being the main social driver of CSR.

**Table 2 Social variables of CSR and CSH**

Sources of motivation	CSR perspective	
	Advocate	Adversary
CSHc1 (intended beneficiary)	Citizens of present and future society and non-human nature	Shareholders primarily
CSHc2 (purpose)	Benign intent: promote genuine accountability to society and nature, as well as to shareholders	Malign intent: strategic endeavour to serve profit maximisation through paying lip-service to social and ecological concerns to preclude the need for outside regulation
CSHc3 (measure of success)	Change in activities of corporate agency to serve socio-ecological welfare	Output of glossy reports with persuasive data presentation

“If I have learned anything from my 15 years working with companies it is that people care passionately about these issues and believe that if they get their company responding they are making a very big contribution” (JP)

“[CSR] tries to convince people that their best way of getting change is as a consumer, buying things and voting with their till receipts” (CF)

### **Economic variables**

All three CSR variables might be considered component resources – forms of ‘capital’ - for the corporate agency (CSHc5). Questions regarding sources of control may help

surface the relationship between traditional economic capital with other forms of capital.

**Table 3 Economic variables of CSR and CSH**

Sources of control	CSR perspective	
	Advocate	Adversary
CSHc4 (decision maker)	Society through customer buying-power	Shareholders primarily, through CEO
CSHc5 (resources)	Need to make economic subservient to human, social and natural capital.	CSR is attempt to widen sphere of resource control to include human, social and natural capital
CSHc6 (decision environment)	CSR recognises limitations on control over different resources, particularly social and natural capital	Diminishing regulation: increasing limitations on what corporates do not have control over

“Aren’t you in danger of patronizing most people? I don’t think people *have* been seduced into this passive, consumerist mindset. Some... try and ward off regulation, no question about that. But some companies welcome increased regulation... to see off the free-riders, the cowboys...” (JP)

“... [W]e can’t change this through reform, through engaging with governments and corporations... You have to have a process that devolves power to people rather than supports the existing power structures” (CF)

### Ecological variables

Ecological factors can be prominent in sources of control, but are given further significance through CSH questions on legitimacy since non-human nature in particular cannot speak for itself.

**Table 4 Ecological variables of CSR and CSH**

Sources of legitimacy	CSR perspective	
	Advocate	Adversary
CSHc10 (witness)	CSR advisor in alliance with radical environmentalists	CSR advisor and co-opted environmental groups
CSHc11 (emancipation)	CSR provides opportunity for ecocentric values	CSR effectively restricts opportunity for truly dissenting ecocentric viewpoint
CSHc12 (worldviews)	The ecocentric voice can challenge and shape existing econo(my)-centric worldview through the CSR advisor or other ‘experts’ involved in the enterprise.	Space denied for meaningful dialogue because of cooption and convergence of shallow ecocentric views to doctrine of environmental economics in CSR practice.

“Well I don’t want to destroy companies’ legitimacy. We are going to need them, to ensure that wealth creators comply with the laws, have a proper relationship with government, consumers, and so on. I want to transform the way government mandates their legitimacy” (JP)

“It’s not government that gives legitimacy, it is people... In that multinationals exist to concentrate wealth and power – no, they have no place in a just world... To assume that the only way of distributing goods and services to meet people’s needs is through capitalism – that you need the profit motive to do that – ignores the idea that you could have another system...” (CF)

## Interrelating variables

Attention here might be given to sources of expertise – practitioners who may secure ‘joined up thinking’. Whereas the advocate may trust in CSR expertise, the adversary is likely to doubt espoused levels of joined-up-thinking coupled with professed levels of independence.

**Table 5 Interrelating variables of CSR and CSH**

Sources of knowledge	CSR perspective	
	Advocate	Adversary
CSHc7 (expert)	Independent consultants	Consultants significantly paid for by shareholders
CSHc8 (expertise)	Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary	Expertise circumscribed through contract with decision makers and bounded traditional disciplinary cultures
CSHc9 (guarantor)	Professionally transparent and honest with levels of uncertainty	Professional false assurances of supposed value-free knowledge and consensus amongst experts

“The difficulty is persuading government to be more proactive... we have this huge disconnect between a rhetorical understanding of what the problem is and a policy delivery process which is pathetically inadequate... [T]here is no difference between stakeholders of a company, including its shareholders, and society. Ultimately companies cannot work in societies that are imploding. They can’t make money!” (JP)

“... [T]ruly good people get trained up in sustainable development, then go and work for the corporations and get sucked up... Increasing the number of people working on the inside is not going to create change. The most effective thing is to be out there talking with people, increasing mistrust of corporations and government, making people angry, making people want to take action”(CF)

### **(fwP) Getting it right with contrasting perspectives?**

From contrasting perspectives of the advocate and the adversary it is clear that judgements on ‘fact’ regarding the triple bottom line are clearly shaped by value judgements. CSH provides three ways of surfacing the *difference* between value judgements amongst stakeholders: (i) contrasting ‘ought’ with ‘is’, (ii) contrasting ‘involved’ with ‘affected’, and (iii) contrasting perceived stakes with stakeholding development from each stakeholder perspective.

## 'ought' vs 'is'

A conventional way of contrasting viewpoints in CSH suggested by Ulrich is by addressing CSH questions in the descriptive 'is' mode (as in Table 1) in ethical juxtaposition with the normative 'ought' mode. So for example CSHc2 in Table 1 would be expressed as 'what ought to be/ is the purpose of S'. Similar ought/is formatting can be applied to each of the other eleven questions. The contrast between the CSR advocate and adversary discussed above might be considered in these ethical terms, with the advocate being representative of the normative 'ought' perspective, and the adversary being representative of the descriptive 'is' perspective.

## Involved vs affected

CSH is a significant systems tool in demarcating explicitly the division between stakeholders 'involved' in the system - beneficiaries, decision makers and experts - and stakeholders 'affected by' the system - witnesses (as illustrated in Table 1). From a CSR-advocate perspective, Achterkamp and Vos (2007) using CSH suggest adopting the term 'passively involved' rather than 'victims' to identify the 'affected' in CSR activities. The CSR adversary however might prefer using the term 'victims'! Whatever term is used, ultimately the legitimacy of a system can only be granted from outside the system of interest - those affected by the system - hence the need for a wider deliberation on value judgements between questions CSHc1-9, and CSHc10-12.

## Stakes vs stakeholding development

The stakeholding categories (CSHc3, CSHc6, CSHc9 and CSHc12) themselves invite consideration of the *developmental* idea of stakeholding, holding promise for change in juxtaposition to what is perceived to be at stake. Often, the possibilities of such development are overridden by a narrow view of stakeholding as individuals protecting their stakes. CSH surfaces such tensions. In relation to CSR, particular stakeholdings associated with different stakeholder groups might be conveyed in terms of a tension between unbounded situation-oriented issues and bounded systems-oriented imperatives. Table 6 illustrates what each stakeholder group associated with a system *needs* in order to progress their stakeholding.

**Table 6 Stakeholding 'needs' and CSH**

Stakeholder role	Stakeholding issue	(Situation-oriented) What's at stake?	(System-oriented) Stakeholding development
Intended beneficiaries	CSHc3: measures of success	Need to have purpose and rationale translated to some measurable output(s) for evaluating	'Measures' of responsibility may not be appropriate for changing situation. Need to adapt measures to changing contexts
Decision makers	CSHc6: decision environment	Need to have some command and control over real world entities	Command and control <i>model</i> is inappropriate for contemporary complex social and ecological dynamics. Need to let go of control whilst retaining some command.

Experts	CSHc9: guarantor	Need to have some assurance towards meeting stated aims or purpose	Expertise is fallible and ever-changing. Need to build in humility to <i>expert systems</i> of support to make clear where false claims of assurances are being made.
Witness	CSHc12: worldviews	Need to show recognition and appreciation of other opposing worldviews	Contrasting worldviews cannot be co-opted into an <i>existing worldview</i> underpinning a system. Need to acknowledge possible legitimacy of other worldviews

The value of responsibility in CSR might therefore be judged from different stakeholders' perspectives in terms of:

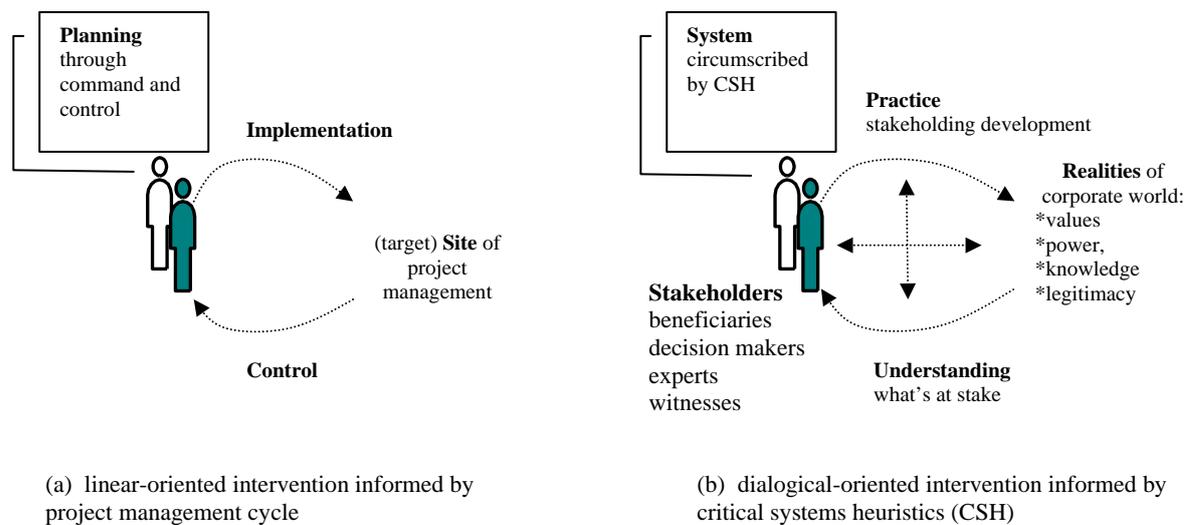
- (i) (beneficiaries) some measure, whilst not discounting the immeasurable domain, of responsibility,
- (ii) (decision makers) some command over, but not control of, responsibility
- (iii) (experts) some assurance towards, but not guarantee for, responsibility, and
- (iv) (witnesses) some space for, but not cooption into, defined parameters of responsibility.

CSH thus suggests several ways in which the conversation of responsibility might be anticipated and enacted for CSR

### ***(fwR) Getting a grip with uncertainty and conflict***

A framework for responsibility presents an opportunity to step back from the situation and reflect on the application of frameworks for understanding (given likely uncertainty) and practice (given likely conflict in perspectives) in terms of an overall methodology of intervention. This does not mean getting a grip on the situation. Such an imperative is more in common with typical project management cycles circumscribed by linear command-and-control models of intervention as illustrated in Figure 3(a). Rather it means getting a grip on the dynamics of CSR as a system of interest in the situation; specifically the dynamic tensions between systems and situation, and between practice and understanding. So how does CSH measure up in terms of enabling an ethic of 'doing what's good' – contrasting systems with situations with the aim to transform situations, and an ethic of 'doing what's right' – contrasting practice with understanding? Figure 3(b) provides a CSH-informed model of intervention to compare with a typical project management cycle. The CSH dialogical model illustrates an emphasis on (i) using systems for interrogating vital issues and dilemmas of CSR reality, and (ii) enabling stakeholding development.

**Figure 3 Comparing two models of intervention**



## Systems and situations

CSH as a heuristic system provides a persuasive lens through which to explore and transform essential issues of *value* (CSHc1-3), *power* (CSHc4-6), *knowledge* (CSHc7-9) and political *legitimacy* (CSHc10-12) regarding corporate activity. Together they provide a composite ideological framing of CSR. But what value might this have for the advocate and adversary respectively?

The CSR advocate might see relatively little value in surfacing ideological constructs: “It is with great difficulty that I can get any of these companies to talk about capitalism. Most of what they are doing is being done by default... Nobody has it in their power to stop them doing what they do because *people want to buy what they produce!*” (JP)

The adversary is more ready to recognise CSR as an ideological construct: “[CSR is part of] a capitalist system... [of] neoliberal free-market ideology...Capitalism sucks up the collective genius around it into its own project. That is what has happened to the Green Movement...I believe a more co-operative system could meet peoples needs in a more egalitarian way” (CF)

## Practice and understanding

CSH prompts questions, not just on who the relevant stakeholders are to look out for in CSR, but the kinds of stakeholding development that might be anticipated for each stakeholder group. Thus CSH potentially moves away from intransigent defending of stakes that often debilitates intervention.

The advocate would likely endorse this CSH attribute, arguing for a responsibility based on a pragmatic ethic: “I am often criticized for selling out. But I am doing what

I believe works... There is a sense that you are demonizing companies. But... you are really demonizing the people who work for them... The interests of society and the interests of corporations *must* converge eventually. I think you have to allow the oil, transport and aviation companies the possibility of a journey” (JP).

The adversary suspects that any engagement is tantamount to co-option, serving only an agenda of profit-maximization: “The idea that is coming strongly through the media and through CR [corporate responsibility] is that you don’t have to think about these things – corporations share your values and your principles. And that really frustrates efforts to empower people... [One large corporate company] ran a million-pound PR [public relations] campaign: ‘get people to engage’, ‘we want to hear’, ‘say whatever you want to about us’... This is how CR evolved... The structure is the problem, and so we need to find alternative ways of structuring things” (CF).

The CSH dialogical model illustrates an emphasis on (i) using systems for interrogating situations, and (ii) enabling stakeholding development through practice and understanding.

## **Summary**

The promise of CSR can be likened to the promise of systems thinking. Enlightened corporate CSR advocate advisors aspire to be holistic – triple bottom line adherents – as well as appreciative of alternative perspectives on corporate activity. A CSR adversary might likewise claim privilege to a more holistic overview and engagement with opposing perspectives. However, like the systems practitioner, the CSR advocate and adversary might also need to get a grip with the challenges and limitations of framing. The critical systems framework presented here provides some way forward in recognising the differences between, and respective challenges in, frameworks for understanding-fwU and frameworks for practice-fwP, both shaped by an ethical framework for responsibility-fwR. Responsibility here is understood in terms of keeping alive the tensions between (i) systems and situations – not confusing the map for the territory - and (ii) practice and understanding – enabling stakeholding development rather than intransigence.

In this paper, CSH has been explored as a particularly rich source of interrelated categories for helping to frame understanding, practice and responsibility for interventions associated with CSR. A critical systems framework might be helpful in assessing other tools used for CSR as well as getting to grip with arguments for and against CSR more generally.

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