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THE STAKEHOLDERS THEORY AS A STARTING POINT FOR THE CRITIQUE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

TEORIA INTERESARIUSZY JAKO PUNKT WYJŚCIA DO KRYTYKI SPOŁECZNEJ ODPOWIEDZIALNOŚCI BIZNESU

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Summary: Corporate social responsibility is becoming more and more popular all over the world. It is promoted by governments and transnational organizations. Nevertheless, since its establishment, it has gained a large group of enemies and still meets with a wave of criticism from different sides, beginning from economists, standing on the position that the purpose of business is only to generate income, through philosophers, who see in CSR a new tool for social enslavement, ending at sociologists, who see an element of corporate management and modern control technology in it. The article presents the most important arguments against corporate social responsibility. It also engages in a polemic against opponents of this concept. However, the starting point is the theory of stakeholders, considered by many as the framework of CSR.

Keywords: stakeholder, criticism, polemic, CSR, governmentality.

Streszczenie: Społeczna odpowiedzialność biznesu cieszy się coraz większym zainteresowaniem firm i instytucji na całym świecie. Promują ją rządy i organizacje ponadnarodowe. Mimo to ma liczne grono przeciwników i nadal spotyka się z falą krytyki, płynącą z różnych środowisk – począwszy od ekonomistów, stojących na stanowisku, że celem biznesu jest wyłącznie generowanie zysku, przez filozofów, którzy upatrują w społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu nowe narzędzie społecznego zniewolenia, po socjologów, którzy widzą w niej element korporacyjnej strategii zarządzania i nowoczesną technologię kontroli. W artykule przedstawione zostały najważniejsze argumenty wysuwane przeciwko społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu. Podjęta została także polemika z oponentami tej koncepcji. Punktem wyjścia jest natomiast teoria interesariuszy, uznawana przez wielu za zrąb koncepcji CSR.

Słowa kluczowe: interesariusz, krytyka, polemika, CSR, rządomyślność.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is an attempt to answer the question whether the development of the stakeholders theory, considered by many as the framework of CSR, has stimulated criticism of corporate social responsibility.

To be able to review pros and cons of corporate social responsibility, the author will briefly analyse the development of the stakeholders theory itself. Before that she will try to define the concept of CSR.

Literature does not specify a single uniform definition for CSR. According to Marcin Żemigala, the majority of terms describing this phenomenon referes to voluntary social and environmental aspects of a company. [Żemigala 2007, p. 20]

The same author also cites one of the international definitions of CSR, adopted by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development: “CSR is expressed in a continuous commitment of business to ethical behavior and contributes to economic development, improves the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as local communities and society as a whole”. This definition, however, focuses primarily on pro-social activities, ignoring other, equally important aspect of CSR, which is the protection of the environment.

Contemporarily, official definition of corporate social responsibility presented in 2001 by the European Commission in the document Green Paper: Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility has divided CSR on internal and external. The first one includes pro-workforce activities, the latter actions adressed to partners, customers, public authorities, local community and ecology. [Gasparski 2003, p. 55]

In 2011, with regards to the evolution of the CSR concept, the European Commission presented a statement, that contains a new definition of CSR. [Renewed EU 2011, p. 7] The most important change, when compared to the previous version, was the removal of the term “voluntary action” and the announcement to conduct work on strengthening CSR strategy in the policy of the European Union. Generally, however, the European Commission defines the phenomenon of CSR as a concept that takes into account social and environmental aspects of commercial activities in liaison with stakeholders.

Stakeholder theory has its roots in the beginning of the 30s of the twentieth century, that is the time of large corporations development and a significant increase of the strength of public opinion. It was also the time of rising social expectations adressed to business, when the basic assumptions of the theory of stakeholders were formulated. However, it was not until 1979, when R. E. Freeman created the definition of a stakeholder. The concept of stakeholder refers to a person that benefits from the existence and a proper functioning of a company.

Stakeholders include not only shareholders, employees, investors and customers, but also general public, local communities and the government. Stakeholders claim the right to interfere with business. This is reflected in their expectations adressed

to company, and may result from the fact that it coexists in a local community along with other members of society.

A company must therefore pursue two goals. The most important one – to generate income, and the second one, no less important, to take good care of relationships with the environment and stakeholders it is dependant on. A company, according to Freeman, must not be selfish when approaching its resources and it has to act consciously and contribute to the compensation of any losses resulting from its economic activity. It must also satisfy the needs of the environment, including the needs of its stakeholders.

In the early 80s, Freeman began to create a theoretical construct out of his observations. He enriched the existing management tools with the description of a broader context, to give a full answer to the question how to manage business effectively. The concept has gained its most mature form with the work “Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach 1984.” Freeman proved in it that the power of stakeholders continued to grow and it was a proces that could not be reversed.

To thrive a company must take into account the expectations of stakeholders. [Freeman 2010, p. 107]. The idea encountered a wave of criticism from many business environments, for which a company should primarily generate profits.

2. A dispute about corporate social responsibility

In fact CSR has both, a large group of supporters and opponents around the world. And although the theory of stakeholders seems to organize the very idea of CSR, the dispute about it has been continuing since the 30s of the twentieth century. It is when Merrick Dodd, an American lawyer and Harvard professor specializing in companies’ rights and obligations, noted that the aim of modern company should not only be to generate income, but actions on social issues as well. [Lewicka-Strzałecka 2006, p. 15]

According to his opponents, and opponents to the concept of corporate social responsibility at the same time, business should be completely separated from the social issues. Pro-social actions of companies contribute to human helplessness, evoke demanding attitude of societies and can lead to economic crisis. It was one of the key arguments against CSR activities. Despite being raised nearly 80 years ago, it is still supported by many critics of the concept today.

Are they right? Often companies undertake CSR activities to show that they are familiar with local issues, the environment and general public concerns. They even include CSR into their policies. An example of such an approach may be a production plant that inevitably pollutes natural environment to certain extent, but , aware of the concequences to local flora and fauna, plants new trees in the area, creates an environmentally friendly office or organizes educational campaigns for children. Whereas opponents will call it a hypocrisy, supporters would find it a reasonable and rational action. What else is different for the representatives of these two opinions?

First of all, it should be noted that among both, the supporters and the opponents, one can find people that vary in the extent of their denial or support towards CSR.

Corporate social responsibility is in fact a heterogeneous, multi-layered concept, and as such variously understood. Therefore, among CSR followers there are those who accept its concept unquestionably, as well as those who realize not all companies equally apply it to the basic standards and principles.

The latter understand, therefore, that an unclear definition of CSR may cause some distortions and abuses on the companies' part that may wish to camouflage their not always responsible actions with social responsibility. The same goes to opponents of the concept. There are some who categorically demand the separation of economics from philanthropy, and others who accept certain pro-social activities. However, in this paper, we will not divide 'pros' and 'cons' onto strong and weaker ones, but we will try to outline the main antagonisms around the concept of CSR.

A few years ago, words of criticism towards CSR were directed mainly to the creators and supporters of the Lisbon Strategy. This European Union document calls the member states to undertake steps to encourage local entrepreneurs to introduce management that is not only income-oriented, but environment friendly and socially beneficial as well.

After about half of primarily designed period, the strategy was claimed ineffective, poorly coordinated and with conflicting priorities. This does not mean, however, no further actions were undertaken to complete its implementation. Quite the contrary. It has been agreed, in order to increase Europe's competitiveness versus Asia and North America, to modify objectives and improve their implementation, and thus intensify educational efforts with regards to CSR.

CSR enthusiasts support this idea. They believe that company's revenue is not the only factor that enables its functioning. Enterprises benefit from all the basic goods available to the public, such as: mineral resources, infrastructure, healthcare services or police. It is then worth educating entrepreneurs and make them realize that if they wish to take from society, they should give something back in return. According to CSR supporters, that 'something' is CSR activity.

A situation when companies' policies turn out to be more effective than state legislation is a key argument for corporate social responsibility. As an example, it is worth mentioning certain tragedies caused by sluggish legislative, that often could have been avoided with CSR awareness.

In the United States new car safety standards are introduced as a legal act only if certain hundreds car accident victims are reported dead. [Lewicka-Strzałecka 2006, p. 19] Similarly, slow legislation to provide assistance to natural disasters victims, often threatens their lives and increases losses.

In such situations, support from socially engaged enterprises turns out to be the only solution. The same refers to educational and social events carmakers run to prevent traffic accidents. As it has been demonstrated, in some cases it is not possible to separate business from social issues, unlike the opponents of CSR would like to see it. The companies are an integral part of society and should therefore share responsibility for society with the state.

A counterargument to that view is an accusation of lacking morality in business and servility of governments to large corporations whose turnover often exceeds the GDP of some countries. Big companies can in fact use their dominant position to dictate their terms to governments. If indeed that is the case, it applies only to the largest companies in the world, and this, in turn, according to the supporters of CSR, narrows the understanding of its concept. CSR should not be in fact referred only to big market players, but in general to small business or any institution.

3. Milton Friedman against CSR

One of the main opponents to the concept of CSR in the United States is an economics Nobel prize winner Milton Friedman. He argues that the primary aim of any corporation is to raise income. [Rybak 2004, p. 18] Moreover, in his opinion, allocating any part of profits earned by a company to social issues is against the principles and violation of property rights and the obligation to fulfill contracts.

Companies are in fact obliged by their shareholders to take care of their business, so the use of resources for purposes other than originally planned seems like breaking arrangements with them. Friedman also believes that CSR interferes with market rules. His follower Martin Wolf also adds that: "The aim of good companies is making profit, rather than saving the planet", [Lewicka-Strzałeczka 2006, p. 23] He and other contemporary opponents of CSR fully support Friedman's opinion, expressed in 1970 in the article: "Social responsibility of business is to increase its profits." [Friedman, 1970] The key issues against the corporate social responsibility are:

1. Company's management is responsible for implementing wishes of its owners (shareholders) and should make all the money it can to secure high returns on owners investments.

2. Company must comply with the rules of a free market in accordance with good practice. This means that it should be fair with the shareholders and only avoid bad outcome, rather that actively contribute to making good.

3. Company is a purely economic institution and never acts on moral grounds, and its organizational structure is focused on practical goals, mainly including the multiplication of wealth.

4. Applying social responsibilities to managers is a mistake, because it distracts them from their primary job, that is to make profit.

5. Allocating resources to social needs is also a mistake, because it weakens the effectiveness of a company towards its competition, which, in contrast, can fully invest in its own development.

6. Such activities have a negative impact on the level of competitiveness, which may lead to the increase of price of goods and services consumers ultimately pay for.

7. It is also the use of other people's resources. They fully belong to shareholders, customers and employees, so if they wanted, they could donate some of their funds to charity.

8. Manager who transfers money to charity leaves the area of market and enters politics, and the two roles should not be combined.

9. Allocation of funds to social purposes, rather than to the company's development, can cause a sense of underestimation among employees and thus lead to internal conflicts.

These are just some of the arguments of the main American CSR opponent. Most of his points underpins Friedman's one-sided attitude to corporate social responsibility. To balance the author will review all his arguments and try to take the opposite standing.

Re. 1 First argument on maximizing profits, means a rejection by Friedman of any costs associated with pro-social activities. However, that is not entirely true. Friedman allows companies to allocate some of their money to "do moral good", where the aim is to maximize their profits. This contradicts the basic principle of CSR, that says it is a voluntary action, not driven purely by selfish motivation, but indeed caused by a selfless desire to share.

Re. 2 Another argument does not take into account some situations that sometimes happen to a corporation or enterprise. It is about moments when pure avoidance of bad outcomes turns out to be insufficient to secure safety of a company, its shareholders, employees and customers.

In a situation of an environmental disaster caused by activities of a company or at a time of making announcement of redundancy or a defective product, the company image would be tarnished. In such a case, the company is facing a choice: do nothing or prevent itself in order to improve its own situation.

However, if the company has corporate social responsibility inscribed in own principles and it has been actively implementing them, it could regain public trust much easier, because people would know that this company cares for them.

Re. 3 The argument, in which Friedman says that the company should not act on moral grounds is another proof of his aversion to CSR. We will refer here to the issue of counteracting negative effects of enterprise activities.

Friedman says, that even companies devastating the environment through their technological processes, should not compensate losses, because they are economic institutions whose only purpose is to generate income. Friedman writes about a moral duty to shareholders, but he does not notice that a company has also obligations towards the environment, and to the society that lives in it.

Re. 4 Another argument implies that a socially responsible event involves the whole company, and in such a case there is no one to carry out primary aim – to generate income. Indeed, a CSR – involved company should inform all its employees about this fact, but not all of them will join the process.

Frequently a separate department is responsible for that, or as in smaller companies, an independent specialist. Sales managers, with direct impact on income are, unlike Friedman fears, not overwhelmed with additional CSR duties. Quite the contrary, socially responsible performance of their organizations, that implies improvement

of working conditions and greater guarantees for workers, not only does not weaken their efficiency, but motivates to do even better.

Re. 5 The argument about decreased competitiveness of socially responsible companies, in comparison to those not involved, is another narrowing the CSR. Nowadays, being competitive cannot be identified only with economic aspects. There are several other non-economic factors that contribute to the competition.

One of them is certainly public trust and recognition among customers. In times of a growing popularity of the CSR, not investing in this area can decrease company's competitiveness.

Re. 6 Fear of raising prices of goods and services because of the CSR expenses, also demonstrates lack of understanding in this idea. In fact, even at the point of budget planning, some of the funds should be allocated to social responsibility. It does not cause, as Friedman says, an unexpected increase of prices to secure financial balance of a company.

Re. 7 One of the last Friedman's arguments reduces CSR purely to charity. By calling CSR "charity", he focuses only on activities that support poor people, the socially disadvantaged, and rejects environment-friendly and employee-oriented actions which also constitute the CSR.

Moreover, Friedman concludes that spending money for charities is a disposal of someone else's goods. He does not take into consideration that even more important is that these actions are for the common good and everyone benefits from them.

Re. 8 Friedman's penultimate point is both a denial to the concept of welfare state, and the sole and legitimate guardian of social order. This comes directly from his view not to merge management duties with political activity. According to Friedman, only the state and politicians are allowed to serve society. The welfare state is the one that tends to implement social justice into society. It is based on the principle of subsidiarity and justice, and implements objectives of socio-economic policy, improves social welfare, prevents poverty and unemployment and also combats discrimination. [Jodkowska 2009, pp. 28-30]

But if indeed it had functioned as it should, the company would not have had to engage in social issues. However, as it was mentioned before, authorities are slow in responding to important social issues. As long as the welfare state does not fulfill its tasks properly, companies have to help in solving important social problems.

Re. 9 Final counterargument to Friedman's doubts (regarding conflicts inside a company, caused by spending money for social issues), has already been mentioned in one of the paragraphs above. Again, that is a narrowing of the CSR concept exclusively to charity whereas corporate social responsibility is also responsible for employees. The most important in this process are those employees who understand what CSR really is. They not just evade internal conflicts, but also actively try to participate in corporate social responsibility events.

4. Governmentality as a manifestation of criticism of CSR

Another opponent of corporate social responsibility is a French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault. His concept of “governmentality” that criticises CSR has three meanings:

- First of all it is a set of procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics that create institutions for governance.
- Secondly, it is a kind of trend, aimed to uplift this type of authority over the other forms, such as sovereignty and discipline.
- Thirdly, “governmentality” is a process that involves the governmentalization of the state. [Czyżewski 2009, p. 86]

According to Foucault “governmentality” is neo-liberal denial of the state that puts new management methods in its place to help individuals manage themselves. Following this idea it is possible to reflect the function of the state in the society because it is still there.

We choose our representatives in democratic elections. We expect social and legal assistance, and also security from the state. According to Foucault, the state actively participates in the process of “governmentality”, by keeping control over society and giving the feeling of autonomy to its members. Moreover, the weaker the state and its impact are, the better governmentalized the citizens become. They become more independent and more careful. This new scope of authority gives them a sense of freedom to organize and manage properly. [Nowicka 2009, p. 55] It is a framework of neoliberalism.

One of the “governmentality” researchers, Thomas Lemke, presents the difference between liberalism and neo-liberalism as follows:

- Neoliberalism shaping a new definition of relations between the state and the economy, currently the market, is the regulator of own activity, not the state, as it was in liberalism.
- Rationality of governance is not due to nature, but is shaped by the society, which arranges own freedom itself. [Nowicka 2009, p. 90]

Neoliberalism has also changed the concept of “human capital”. It rejects the enforcement of duty and obedience at work and adheres to “innovation”, “creativity”, “flexibility” and “responsibility”. In this context it opposes the corporate social responsibility.

Neoliberal change of thinking and mentality created an artificial structure – a world in which a guarantee of freedom from state supervision becomes a kind of trap. People have only illusory sense of freedom. They are enslaved by the system, which guarantees their “freedom”, but demands “innovation”, “creativity” and “flexibility”.

Corporate social responsibility in this perspective is just one of the products of neoliberalism. Managers can shape the policies of their companies, but in fact they are crammed in a framework that they impose themselves. They are enslaved by the need to apply to the principles of the new policy. Those who do not subordinate are considered unethical and irresponsible.

Similarly, this neo-liberal phenomenon is described by a British sociologist Sum Ngai-Ling. The article “Wal-Martization and CSR-ization in developing countries”¹ shows two phenomena:

- Corporate activity of the largest network of American supermarkets – Wal-Mart, which caused economic, legal and social transformations.
- CSRization phenomenon, which means adopting a business strategy with the aim of increasing the confidence of consumers and investors.

The author refers to Foucault notes that CSR is primarily a control technology. Its practices and procedures are designed to prevent increasing power of social activism. [Ngai-Ling 2009, p. 15] According to Sum Ngai-Ling all the CSR standards, programs, reports, audits and certifications are nothing but acts of “paper panopticon”, or, as he writes later in the article, the type of corporate philanthropy.

The work “Strategy & Society: The Link between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility” by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer also mentions the argument that CSR has become a source of competitive advantage. [Porter, Kramer 2006] According to it, philanthropy came from the ordinary charity and became part of a broader, more strategic approach to business investment.

Proponents of corporate social responsibility can respond to these allegations. Corporate authority has to control all the commitments alone. Citizens cannot choose the management and force it to choose one or any other management technique. In this context CSR activities are an opportunity to regulate the process of managing and changing the managers attitudes. CSR guarantees a true self-control.

5. Other arguments against CSR

Some say that imposing social obligations on companies generally increases their power and influence, which already is quite extensive. Opponents to this concept do not want to allow companies to operate with a belief that they themselves are the conscience of society. [Rybak 2004, p. 20] This raises a serious of threats. First of all they do not want to locate money in an area which is not wealthy, because it can cause developmental imbalances of certain areas. However, the worst thing is that CSR activities with a particular company in a particular area cannot last forever. Cutting off financial support can completely inhibit the development of subsidized areas, and even worse, lead to their collapse. But should the fear of a potential threat be a reason not to undertake any CSR activities? It is worth finding a middle ground to analyze the situation, identify threats, make a decision with what and to what extent a company can get involved?

The argument of the opponents of CSR also mentions those actions of companies that involve corporate social responsibility in areas totally unrelated to their

¹ Neologisms – words derived from the name of the network of US supermarket Wal-Mart and the concept of CSR.

business. Such a domineering approach to CSR is downright unjust and should not be propagated. That is why it is so important to educate companies about corporate social responsibility.

Most controversies are raised by the term “stakeholder”. According to the opponents of the concept of CSR that is so because, it is very blurred. On one hand, it is usually used with regards to all people purchasing products or services – it means both customers and employees and even shareholders. On the other hand, there is a definition, saying that stakeholders are all those whose level of prosperity depends on the decisions made by the company. [Lewicka-Strzalecka 2006, p. 24] It is impossible to clearly determine if the two definitions are identical or whether the other has a much narrower meaning. For example, Anna Lewicka-Strzalecka agrees, stakeholders are only those whom a company arbitrarily designates as its stakeholders.

There comes another problem, that CSR opponents mention. How should the organization identify the expectations of stakeholders and what should it do when these expectations significantly differ from each other? An example of such different needs may be demands of workers: many of them would like a pay raise, but some would prefer shorter working hours. What should company do in this situation? Is the corporate social responsibility able to fairly settle such a conflict? Opponents argue it is not. On one hand, the CSR should encompass all areas of the company, but on the other, responsibility towards all is a responsibility to no one. [Lewicka-Strzalecka 2006, p. 25]

Another downside of CSR, put forward by W. Norman and Ch. McDonald’s, is the fact that it is nothing new. It is rather a duplication of already existing domains. They point out that good relations with customers, employees and authorities are a task for lawyers, HR, PR and marketing specialists.

One of the most controversial allegations to CSR is identifying it with profit-oriented actions, called “grip marketing”. Even worse is the statement that CSR pays off. There would be nothing wrong with it, if it were only about the cost-effectiveness which is positive for society, environment or employees. Worse if companies take actions and call them socially responsible, just to improve their sales and financial outcome. Opponents to CSR have tried to assess how these activities impact the financial balance of company. Unfortunately, this information is very difficult to verify.

A. McWilliams and D. Siegel analyzed 29 companies. Their analysis did not bring answers to the question about the impact of CSR on the company’s finances. The same applies to the case study by S. Waddock and S. Graves. Only one study, conducted four years later (in 2001) by J. Margolis and J. Walsh, as a result of their 30-years long analysis of the CSR, showed that in 53% of cases in which CSR performed as an independent variable, there was a clear positive financial outcome for the company. However, it took a very long time to note any financial benefit of CSR.

Difficult measurements of CSR are therefore another point against this concept. It should be noted, that the main cause for gaps in knowledge about CSR, is the lack

of information about the costs companies borne on it. Every income must be verified by the funds allocated to socially responsible actions, which sometimes are quite high.

6. Conclusions

Although during the presentation of the opponents' views on corporate social responsibility at the same time the author tried to extend adequate counterarguments, this article was devoted mainly to the criticism of CSR. However, this does not mean that the concept has more opponents than supporters. Nor can we unequivocally determine that the criticism presented in the article is mainly focused on the stakeholder theory, which is considered the basis of the concept of CSR. Corporate social responsibility is criticized on many levels – both by economists, sociologists or philosophers. It is impossible to discern the overall concept negating corporate social responsibility.

The arguments only show that the concept of corporate social responsibility is still unfathomable and requires many more studies, which will strengthen it as a new trend of business management. But even if that happens, it will not eliminate the divisions between supporters and opponents of this concept.

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