

## **Summary of Dissertation - Mitchell van Balen - June 2015**

### **"Essays on Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives: The Case for Peripheral CSR"**

A recurrent critique is that firms organize Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in such a fragmented and disconnected manner from business operations and strategy that most of the opportunities to create business and societal value are obscured. Instead, scholars, policy makers and business leaders frequently argue that firms should focus on integrating CSR initiatives into core business operations to foster business opportunities, innovation and competitive advantages. There are however surprisingly few contributions that provide theoretical grounds or empirical evidence to consider that integrating CSR into core business operations should be a key organizing principle. This is especially problematic because recent evidence suggests that core integration can actually be detrimental to business performance, whereas loosely-coupled, peripheral CSR initiatives may create business and societal value more efficiently. Consequently there is an urgent need to challenge this dominant doctrine on CSR organizing and develop an alternative lens on CSR organizing instead.

Within this context the purpose of the dissertation is to investigate 1) the conceptual grounds in favor of organizing peripheral CSR, 2) the benefits, limitations and dynamics of organizing peripheral CSR, and 3) to understand how core and peripheral CSR initiatives co-occur within firms, and how this is affected by the business and institutional environment. To this end the dissertation presents five related but distinct essay-based chapters on peripheral CSR initiatives in various organizational settings, geographies, stakeholder environments, and in relation to contemporary business-society issues.

The dissertation commences with a conceptual study in which the core-periphery thesis is identified as the main framework to understand the widespread endorsement of core CSR. Several critical perspectives are consequently advanced that challenge core CSR, specifically by highlighting the influence of interdependencies between core and peripheral CSR initiatives, the strategic logic of opportunity, institutional and stakeholder pressures, and the need for internalizing externalities. Combined, these perspectives offer the conceptual arguments to challenge core CSR and render peripheral CSR as valuable, inevitable and fair.

The conceptual arguments are corroborated by three original case studies that build on participatory action research. The cases concern plant closures, nuclear waste storage conflicts, and tensions in port areas, and discuss how peripheral CSR was used to foster benefits for the focal organizations and their stakeholders. In addition, the cases offer strong narratives to better understand the limitations and dynamics of peripheral CSR in diverse contexts.

Finally, an extensive study examines how peripheral and core CSR co-occur in organizations. Specifically, the essay investigates CSR integration patterns of twelve European and American firms in the banking and oil industries between 2007 and 2012. Through content analysis it identifies, tracks, and categorizes 2191 unique CSR initiatives and discusses several integration patterns that support the case for a dynamic and contingent perspective on CSR organizing. These results, combined with the findings of the earlier essays, support the conclusion that peripheral CSR should not be disparaged in favor of core CSR. Conversely, the findings contribute to the development of a dynamic and contingent framework on CSR integration.