

Chapter 26

The Normative Grounding of Social Responsibility in African Emerging Markets: A Setho Ethics Approach

Khali Mofuoa

Charles Sturt University, Australia

ABSTRACT

In African emerging markets (AEMs), the prevailing notions of social responsibility (SR) are based chiefly on Western ethics. Even discussions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) have, more often than not, been couched in the similar manner. Consequently, the field of CSR in AEMs is largely unaware of Setho ethics that for it are germane as a basis for thinking and talking about SR. In this chapter, the author proposes Setho ethics rooted in Botho, which sees the communal, interdependence and inter-relatedness of beings, as an alternative vision of CSR in AEMs. In fact, people in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) see themselves in a symbiotic relationship with society, a point well-articulated by Mbiti (1969, p. 24) thus, “I am because you are, and since we are, therefore I am”. This African view through the Setho ethics lenses generates a different notion of an ideal SR of business to society worth illuminating in the CSR discourse today.

INTRODUCTION

In African emerging markets (AEMs), ethical consumerism is a growing phenomenon that underpins ethical trade activities of business (Boluk, 2011; Blowfiled & Dolan, 2008; Darkwa, 2014; Dolan, 2005, 2010; Hughes, et al., 2012; Tallontire et al., 2001; Tustin & De Jongh, 2008). Consumers are increasingly making ethically conscious decisions regarding the consumption of products and services they obtain from business (Busch, 2014; Johnston et al., 2011; Smith, 2008; Tallontire et al., 2001). Therefore, an increasing number of consumers make their consumption decisions on the basis of ethical values (Grauel, 2014; Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014; Tallontire et al., 2001). Such values include, but are not limited to

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6192-7.ch026

environmentally friendly products and production methods; labour standards (wage rates and working conditions); and human rights (Tallontire et al., 2001).

Indeed, the demand among customers for ethical products and services is certainly growing, intensifying the ethical and social pressures on business to behave in a socially responsible manner (Connolly & Prothero, 2008). Under these circumstances, business can no longer afford to ignore their social responsibilities or take them for granted. The message is currently clear, “A statement of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a must-have accessory no large company wants to be without” (Thomas, 2005), at its’ own peril. These days, ethically-attuned consumers want business to undertake ethical business actions that benefit them and their immediate communities first and foremost.

From an ethical consumerism perspective, the concept of CSR is based on perceptions or recognition about business that: Firstly, it is part of society. Secondly, it has the potential to make a positive contribution to societal goals and aspirations. It is within this regard that Ponte, Richey and Baab (2009) refer to CSR as the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute towards societal goals and aspirations. Hence, CSR is seen as a compelling business moral imperative or phenomenon that business cannot afford to ignore any longer (Rossouw & Van Vuuren, 2003), particularly in the AEMs.

Both, the impact of ethical consumerism and the influence of socio-ethical social pressures on CSR practice are increasingly becoming compelling change agents on the relentless calls for business to behave in a socially responsible manner. Indeed, they can be now legitimately taken to be established matters of fact in CSR discourse in AEMs, although the extent to which these developments impact on business practices in these markets remains unclear. What is yet to emerge, however, is an African normative grounding that provides accepted moral basis for the practice of CSR in AEMs, and legitimises the socio-ethical pressures that encourage its development in these markets.

Today, the prevailing analysis and discussions on socio-ethical issues in business in AEMs are based chiefly on Western ethics i.e. moral beliefs and practices of people largely living in North America, Europe and Australasia. Even discussions on CSR have, more often than not, been couched in the similar manner. This has led to a prevailing view of Western ethics as the moral basis of all CSR discourse in these markets. As a consequence, the field of CSR in these markets is largely unaware of *Setho* ethics. It is also not aware of *Setho* ethics principles that for it are germane and attractive as a basis for normative grounding of CSR for business in these markets. In general, *Setho* ethics loosely refers to moral beliefs and practices of the largely Bantu-speaking people of Africa found in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Futhwa, 2012).

The primary aim of this chapter is to ignite and expand discussions on the normative grounding of CSR phenomenon in AEMs from the African worldview of *Setho* ethics using the *Basotho* of Lesotho as a reference point. In doing so, it intends to focus on the analysis of CSR from a normative-historical perspective and the extent to which the discourse of *Setho* ethics could be successfully be deployed to provide the moral basis for the theory and practice of CSR in AEMs. It should be noted that *Setho* ethics demands moral agents to always “perform their duties in all their affairs with humane purity of thought and unmitigated truthfulness” (Mokhehle, 1976, p.31). Here, the African normative account of CSR based on *Setho* ethics raises important issues that when neglected could threaten the credibility of CSR programmes, and impede the articulation and implementation of CSR policies in AEMs.

Furthermore, the confusion relating to the theoretical orientation of the concept of CSR and its moral basis in literature (Crowther & Aras, 2008; Kashyap et al., 2011) gives credence to twisted discourse of CSR as a morally compelling business practice in AEMs. There is, therefore, a need for more robust and sustained normative discourse on CSR to have the much needed moral legitimacy in these markets

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