Fostering corporate social responsibility in small and medium size enterprises. Recent experiences in The Netherlands

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Abstract
In 2004 the Dutch Ministery of Economic Affairs inaugurated 'MVO Nederland', an independent knowledge center and clearing house that initiates and supports corporate social responsibility policies especially on the level of small and medium size enterprises. The center now has over 500 businesses and organisations as partners, and a staff of about 15 people. The paper reports facts and figures, means and methods developed in the initial years, and reflects on experiences gathered and on topics discussed in current literature. Attention is raised particularly to the quality of the motivation to engage in corporate social responsibility, and to the 'institutional approach' that proves fruitful in fostering corporate social responsibility in small and medium size enterprises.

Two developments

Two recent developments have changed the range of attention paid to topics in the field of business ethics. The first development, the turn from 'business ethics' to 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR), has influenced the ways of approaching normative issues in business. The second development, the route from large to small and medium size enterprises (SMEs), proved to be an extension of the field. It enlarged the agenda and multiplied the number of parties involved, but it did not deflect the fundamental direction of the endeavours of people active in the field.

The transition from business ethics to CSR was partly semantic, partly operational in nature. Originally, the indication ‘business ethics’ sounded little attractive in many ears, as it came too close to moral pedantry. Slowly, however, what thirty years ago started in the classroom – the careful analysis of single moral cases in business - found its way to the executive suite as well as to the work floor of real world corporations. On the work floor interest grew in operational devices to tackle normative issues. It resulted in ethical codes of conduct, training sessions to improve moral competence, social audits, reports, and ethical and compliance officers to stimulate and manage the operations. In the executive suite, often under the semantically new heading of ‘CSR’, discussions were initiated on corporate policy and strategy, raising questions about ‘how to do the right thing and stay in business’, what exactly was deemed to be the right thing, and why we should care. Initially, the trajectory from analytical competence to social practice predominantly took place inside large corporations that saw itself confronted with a growing variety of normative questions at home and abroad. Little by little the horizon widened toward small and medium size enterprises also. Not immediately, though, and not automatically. Not immediately. In 1990, the Third Annual Conference of the European Business Ethics Network (EBEN) was dedicated to ‘Market Morality and Company Size’, but it took ten to fifteen more years before ‘Ethics in SMEs’ became a main subject on conference agendas. And not automatically either. Some ‘inconvenient truths’ were required to make social responsibility into a regular part of policy making in business, to generate the recognition that care for the Triple P of ‘People, Planet and Profit’ was a major responsibility not only for governments and politicians, but for citizens and business as well. Subsequently the insight arose that corporate responsibility can be expected not only from large and internationally operating corporations but with equal stringency from that part of the social fabric that in many countries represents more than half of the gross national product and over eighty percent of the workforce, the small and medium size enterprises namely. It proved one thing to accept an overall corporate responsibility, another to extend that responsibility to SMEs. But how to go about it?

A country in which the theme of corporate social responsibility in SMEs recently gained a foothold is the Netherlands. We list some facts and figures, and try to find out whether they lead to conclusions and prospects that possibly reach beyond the Dutch borders.

CSR/SMEs in the Netherlands: facts and figures, means and methods

In 1999, the State Secretary of Economic Affairs then in office in the Dutch government asked the Social Economic Council (SER) to prepare a report on corporate social responsibility and on the role that national and local governments, business, and private civil organisations could be supposed to play. SER is a national and independent advisory body of the government, composed of representatives of employers' associations, trade unions and independent experts. The report was published in 2000 (Sociaal-Economische Raad SER 2000), followed by an English version in 2001 (Sociaal-Economische Raad SER 2001). It was widely spread, and caused an acceleration of the debate on CSR in the Netherlands.

Two elements in the report here deserve our special attention. First, the report implicitly proposed a definition of CSR by defining an enterprise as a value-creating entity, supposed to be active in the three dimensions of People, Planet and Profit, in an open dialogue with all parties involved, and prepared to give a reasonable account of its operations to all those that legitimately can claim access to this information. With some minor variations the definition has become standard in the Netherlands. And second, the report recommended the establishment of a knowledge and information centre for CSR, financed by the government but largely independent in its operations. The government accepted the recommendations of the report, including the one concerning the establishment of the knowledge centre.

It took some years before the centre could start its activities, its founding requiring not only a practical effort, but also a political backing that, in this particular case, had to be guaranteed in a period of great public turmoil and changing political coalitions. But in 2004 the centre, now named *MVO Nederland (= Maatschappelijk Verantwoord Ondernemen Nederland, CSR the Netherlands),* opened its doors. The delay proved to have been fruitful. Deliberations with various parties, held in the incubation period, had made clear that the accent of the centre's activities should be on SMEs, the argument being that, with regard to CSR, large companies can be supposed to take care of themselves. SMEs, however, of comparable importance in number of people involved and in social impact, lagged behind, at least in the public feeling, the sector being less familiar with the subject, less knowledgeable of what it possibly could imply, and often not prone to engage in what might turn out to be an uncertain adventure. There was pioneering work to do for the newly founded centre.

Right from the start *MVO Nederland* aimed at being a multi-stakeholder project rather than a subsidiary of the government. By presenting itself as an independent intermediary organisation it aimed at gaining trust from the part of business as well as from the government and from NGO's. Soon 100 organisations registered as partners of *MVO Nederland*, being a partner standing for being committed to integrate CSR into the core business of the own organisation, and being prepared to share one's experiences with other parties. Early in 2008 the number of partners had risen to 450, 50% of which coming from business. The overall goal of *MVO Nederland*is to stimulate and enable as many Dutch businesses and organisations as possible, preferably those that are active in the area of SME's, to make CSR into a natural part of their business strategy.

At the end of 2005, after a period of trial and error, in which the staff had grown from 4 tot 10 fte's, the centre had developed a stringent strategy, based on the idea that, in order to effectively reach SME's, it would prove indispensable to co-operate with strategic partners that clearly represented or predominantly focussed on SME's, such as intermediary business institutions, trade organisations, chambers of commerce and local administrations, together constituting a large and immediate basis for contacting SME's. Inside the centre, the strategy gradually was labelled as 'an institutional approach'. The approach proved to have three advantages. First, by focussing on already existing intermediaries it becomes possible to contact large numbers of SME's. The centre itself as a relatively small organisation is unable to get in contact with every single SME. Therefore, to reach its goals it is vital that those institutions that in the course of years have built a solid network of SMEs put CSR explicitly on their strategic agenda. Second, business institutions and branch organisations commonly possess relations of trust with SMEs, knowing the language and how to communicate with entrepreneurs within their area, being continuously informed about their problems and needs. And third, by focussing on specific sectors, supply chains, or regions, is becomes possible to translate CSR to the specific context of a branch or industry. Meaning and content of CSR vary sensibly between different sectors or regions. By invoking the help of intermediate institutions that are closely related to specific groups of SME's it is possible to translate the broad topic of CSR into concrete suggestions, suited to be understood and accepted by small businesses. So in the construction sector the emphasis may be put on sustainable building, whereas in the textile sector it may lie on the prevention of child labour or the use of chemicals in the production of cottons.

Working along these lines *MVO Nederland* has been able to reach in a two years period more than 5.000 SME's, stimulating them to integrate CSR into their core business. Working together with twenty trade organisations the centre reaches 40.000 entrepreneurs with specific CSR information. Visits to the centre's web site (www.mvonederland.nl) are increasingly frequent, with 126.000 unique visitors in 2007, and so is participation in the annual event called 'Het Nieuwe Ondernemen"('The New Entrepreneurship'), a one day happening that specifically aims at raising the issue of CSR in SME's, and that in 2007 was held for the third time, attracting that year over 1.000 representatives of business, NGO's and governmental agencies.

Given the results hitherto and the positive feedback issued by many parties involved, the Dutch government has recently decided to continue its supporting subsidy and to raise it even for the next five years. CSR the Netherlands now intends to structurally contact 100.000 SME's in 2012 by working together with 75 intermediary organisations.

Four years of explorations and contacts since the start of the centre have yielded a host of findings and observations. A warning is in place, however. The experiences collected here should not be read as the results of a systematic research project based upon carefully developed hypotheses. The material represents facts and insights collected in shared activities and deliberations of staff members of the MVO centre mutually and with representatives of SMEs. The results should be seen as the provisional outcome of an ongoing action research.

We collect some basic findings and compare them with insights present in current literature.

Findings

First among the basic findings is the fact that ***the** SME does not exist* (D'Amboise and Muldowney 1988). SME is a generic noun for a collection of enterprises, varying in size, branch, products and services delivered, strategies (oriented toward price, quality, niche markets), position and vision of the manager/owner, legal and institutional embedding, and clients expectations. For an attempt to foster CSR in SMEs this finding implies that differentiation must be followed by strategic adaptations based on the specificity of their social environment.

A next observation is related to the *motives*, if any, of the innumerable SMEs to pay attention to issues of CSR. The SER report distinguishes three kind of motives: CSR because it pays, CSR because it is the right thing to do, and CSR because it is inevitable. ‘It pays’, as a motive to engage in an explicit CSR policy, often arises out of an alertness for new opportunities, but it also stands for the expectancy of new profits, at least in the long run. The motive appears most typical for an enterprise that appears permeated by the spirit of innovation. ’It is the right thing to do’ as a motive is of a more personal nature. Often it represents the personal conviction of the owner/ manager that he, and with him his firm, should behave as a good citizen and as a steward of this earth ‘that has been entrusted to us to take care of as a pledge, not as a private property’. It proves to be the most solid motive, whereas the third motive, ‘CSR because it is inevitable’, probably is the most pragmatic one. Here installing a CSR policy means that we cannot, unpunished, go on exploiting natural resources, poisoning the atmosphere, and neglecting basic needs of the unfortunate. Enterprises that do not move voluntarily in the direction of CSR sooner or later will be forced to do so, by legal prescriptions, by social expectations and institutional pressure, or by their own employees. This ‘inevitability argument’ rarely is absent whenever an enterprise commits itself to some form of CSR. It is obvious that, to a large extent, it is externally imposed, but that does not make it less effective.

The three motives do not exclude but rather strengthen each other. The ‘right thing to do’ argument more readily will be found where a leader shows the capability to make his personal convictions into an integral part of the firm’s culture – which more easily will be the case in manager-owned small and medium size firms. The ‘it pays’ motive on itself appears to be a strong incentive for CSR policy, but equally often it serves as supplementary to corporate decisions of ‘the right thing to do’ or the ‘inevitability’ type. Motivational fluidity is no exception in the domain of morals. In sum, few CSR policies will prove stable and sustainable when the profit motive is totally absent, but no one will when a feeling about the right thing to do is patently lacking. For at the end of the day it is moral sensitivity that guarantees the quality of the motives.

Among the basic findings yet another fact deserves mentioning. Next to the simultaneously present mixed motives a *distribution* emerges of parties involved, consisting of a restricted number of front-running corporations, a bulk of firms moving slowly but steadily, and a rear of hardly interested enterprises. Occasionally there may be a transition from the rear to the bulk, or from the bulk to the front, and vice versa, but the total distribution remains fairly stable. At best, the quality of the whole rises a bit, all the parties gradually improving their relative performances, due to an internal drive or external pressure.

Fact-finding in the real world of SMEs is one source of insight, recent literature is another one. After a long period of sparse supply, studies and research reports on CSR in SMEs are now growing in number and quality. We look at some highlights.

Highlights in current literature

Recurrent issues can be grouped under the headings: obstacles to CSR policy in SMEs, stimuli, and strong and weak points.

Obstacles to the development of CSR in SMEs commonly are classified as lack of time, of knowledge, of money, and of negotiating power, lack of factors, that is, that are deemed indispensable to initiate a fully fledged CSR policy (Lepoutre/Valente 2007; Lepoutre/Heene 2006; Murillo/Lozano 2006). Obstacles are sometimes summarised as lack of 'discretionary slack', lack of mental space for innovation and social initiative, a form of bounded rationality due to the limited width of functional areas covered by the enterprise, to the restricted depth of formation of the staff members, and the paucity of opinions allowed to exist next to the convictions of the owner (Lepoutre/Heene 2006, 263).

Stimuli can consist in laws that create a level playing field and that reward CSR initiatives, and in good examples and best practices of others, especially of important clients, next to activist behaviour of consumers, and social awards and prizes (Spence and Rutherfoord 2001; Jenkins

2006). Important proves stimulation of basic capabilities, supportive to promote a culture of CSR, as there are *network building* capability to create social capital, *collaborative* capability to exploit relationships, *institutional* capability to defy traditional norms and practices and to build alternative ones, and ‘*organicity*’, organisational flexibility and adaptability (Lepoutre/Valente 2007). One might remark that these capabilities are needed in many processes of innovation, not only where corporate social responsibility is at stake. True as that may be, it does not diminish their meaning in our specific case, as in matters of CSR in SMEs too innovative courage and inventiveness are needed, especially at the start.

Pointing to *strong and weak points* with regard to fostering CSR in SMEs, the literature shows a certain twist. Twenty years ago some studies were available, be it scantly. In 1990, an ethical bibliography of 700 books and articles presented six titles related to ethics in SMEs. They put a clear accent on how to behave in a morally correct way with regard to decent work relations and product quality within the informal and closely-knitted system of the small firm, or frankness and honesty towards customers that at the same time happen to be neighbours and acquaintances (Harvey, van Luijk and Corbetta 1991; van Luijk 1993). ‘Ethics in the small enterprise’ more or less was modelled after the moral customs of a rural community, with the advantage of the closeness and familiarity that typifies life in the village, but with the disadvantages of the tacit ‘submission agreement’ that urges people to stay within the boundaries of the local way of life. Gradually, however, a twist became visible, in real life experiences as well as in literature. The twist not primarily affected the *nature* of small and medium size enterprises but the attention paid to the *institutional configuration* within which they were supposed to operate. SMEs more and more faced the inevitability of a new type of entrepreneurship, marked by requirements concerning transparency, environmental consciousness and social responsibility, by CSR as part of its core business. The shift provoked a change in the point of view taken in the scientific literature as well as in daily practice. Analysis now is not exclusively oriented anymore toward a moral judgement, but is inspired also by insights from sociology and organisational sciences. Remarks as briefly summarised above about the multiple capabilities apt to foster CSR in SMEs can be seen as an example of this new kind of approach. But at the same time a weak spot becomes visible in the present state of affairs. In spite of innovative efforts, a coherent theory on how to conceptualise CSR in SMEs, and how to foster its development, is still under construction

(Lepoutre/Heene 2006). The standard handbook on CSR in SMEs yet has to be written. But maybe experiential findings and soundings in literature as collected here at least enable us to develop the concept of an agenda for further actions and reflections.

Concept of an agenda

Help can be found in a recent document of the European Expert Group on CSR and SME, entitled *Opportunity and Responsibility - How to help more small businesses to integrate social and environmental issues into what they do* (2007). The document stresses the importance of co-operation and partnerships on the local and regional level and among branches and sectors. It states explicitly that public authorities too have to assume responsibility in this respect, and that more scientific research is needed. It ends by proposing as a guideline that, instead of an elite that develops a formal and complex CSR policy, preferably a very great number of enterprises should take small but valuable steps – a plea for the Gulliver principle that says that many small hands can achieve as much or more than a few big ones. The tips sound sensible and stimulating, but they deserve to be made more explicit. Given the present state of affairs of CSR in SMEs, the agenda we are looking for will contain only a limited number of items, diverse as well as complex. We restrict ourselves to two such items, under the head of 'motivation' and 'institutions'

Motivation

With regard to *motivation* we registered different motives why people can show commitment to CSR, namely because 'it pays', 'it is the right thing to do', or because 'it is inevitable'. That does not explain however how, especially in the domain of SMEs, people in fact do choose one of these motives, or a combination of two or three of them, as an action guide for their entrepreneurial behaviour, or, put more broadly, why many people most of the time feel a certain urge to behave in a moral way, and why some others do hardly or not at all. The questions primarily belong to the realm of moral psychology, but they also give rise to a series of new questions, this time on the level of corporate policy and the shaping of corporate decency. Is morality predominantly a matter of individual motivation? Is CSR a matter of morality? What is the action space persons or corporations need to engage effectively in fostering CSR in SMEs, and how to motivate people to do so? By raising a moral appeal? By using a policy of carrot and stick? By providing elaborate information and telling examples? By facilitating contacts between people and organisations that have the same questions and that are eager to share experiences? By finding out first where in a given constellation power is located, whose vocabularies are dominant and which institutional arrangements are extant? By all those means, prudently spread according to needs and receptive capacities of various audiences?

In its attempts to foster CSR in SMEs *MVO Nederland* effectively makes use of all approaches mentioned. This has proven to be a fruitful policy, while at the same time it is clear that in processes of implementation the art of adaptation alone is not enough. What is needed first and foremost is inner strength, in a normative as well as strategic sense. Normative strength in the realm of CSR implies a firm stance when it comes to prudence or morality as basis of corporate responsible behaviour, or, in terms that we used earlier, when it comes to 'it pays' and/or 'it is the right thing to do' as basic motivation. Both motives can play a role, but commitment to CSR cannot remain stable and sustainable without a clear choice for morality as a substantial element in the motivational set-up. Those who think that, in this context, 'morality' is too high-flying a concept can be reassured by the experience that 'civility' or 'social decency' will do the job as well. Each of these terms expresses that, at the end of the day, to commit oneself to CSR is to accept civil responsibility. Nevertheless, those who think anyhow that to present CSR in SMEs as a moral duty amounts to moral overdemandingness, to stretching too far what society can reasonably expect from single individuals or enterprises, are right, to a certain degree at least. Nobody is obliged to take single-handedly the burden of the world upon his shoulders. But the story of morality does not end with this statement. Ethical theorists here introduce the 'displacement principle' (De George 1990), which says that, where an individual or a single firm misses the power to stop what needs to be stopped, or to change what deserves to be changed for the better, there someone's moral duty does not come to an end but a displacement is due to another level, one step higher, to a level where co-operation can achieve what individuals or single firms cannot bring about. Single-handedly to improve the world is not a moral duty, but to contribute to an effective co-operation to make change possible is.

The moral displacement principle is an important guide for SMEs that face a situation in which to leave things unchanged is unacceptable and to proceed alone is a dead-end. At the same time, the principle helps to lift CSR out of the realm of private preferences, and transform it into a social project.

Experiences gathered in *MVO Nederland* bear witness of the fact that, in the realm of SMEs, front runners recognise that a distinct moral drive, be it not always labelled as such, is pushing them to do the right thing. Often it is this affinity with moral convictions that makes them into frontrunners. It prevents them from gradually sliding into the region of pure prudence, of 'it pays', where valuable results undoubtedly can be achieved but where the splendour of unselfishness as a mark of excellence is easily dulled, and with it their exemplary power. Next to that, they willingly underline that CSR in SMEs is not a solitary enterprise but a social project of co-operation and innovation in which much depends on effective facilitation. This brings us from basic moral motivation to basic institutions.

Institutions

A primordial question for SMEs when engaging in CSR as a social project is: 'Who are my allies?' Allies are all those who are seriously willing to contribute to CSR, all those individuals, groups and institutions that are in a position to actively support the CSR policy of an enterprise. They should not be equated with 'stakeholders', another central category in business ethics. In 'stakeholders' the accent is on rights, interests, and legitimate claims, whereas 'allies' points to facilitating and co-operative capabilities. Stakeholders are important because they have rights, allies because they represent power.

Characteristic for many SMEs, so we have seen, are short and personal lines of communication with a multitude of parties, as members of the personnel, clients, suppliers, the local community, and, in a wider circle, professional colleagues, banks, and regional and national authorities. But are they all potential allies? Not necessarily. Members of the personnel can act as allies in CSR as long as there is an ongoing exchange and a basic consensus about CSR between the personnel and the manager/owner. Clients, suppliers, the local community, but also parties within the wider circle can act as allies only to the extent that they are sufficiently organised, and are triggered by issues of CSR. Being organised can take the form of local or regional chambers of commerce, industrial or professional associations and branches, communal or district councils, up to political parties and governmental agencies. With all these parties fruitful exchange and co-operation are possible that greatly facilitate the emergence of a pattern of shared responsibilities.

CSR in SMEs seldom will be a solo performance. For a social project co-operation is indispensable. This especially obtains when co-operation is aimed at between, on the one hand, parties operating in the private sphere, and potential allies in the public sphere on the other hand, for example an intended CSR-co-operation between an enterprise or a private industrial association and a communal council, a regional chamber of commerce, or a governmental agency. Projects here require, next to serious negotiations about mutual intentions and objectives, an overall institutional analysis of the involved parties, the distribution of power, the dominant vocabularies in use, and the representative and treaty-making authority of the participants. These requirements are primarily situated on the strategic level. But finding allies includes also normative exigencies. Two specifically. The first one we encountered already speaking about the displacement principle where we found out that searching for effective allies in CSR is not only a strategic operation but a moral duty as well. The second normative requirement is to search not just for single allies, but also to develop an explicit and well-equilibrated pattern of responsibilities among the different parties. Indeterminacy regarding the pattern of everybody's responsibility causes vagueness and fluidity in any moral project. Reaching an early consensus in this respect is a first moral achievement.

Firm motives and institutional configurations are also the two main pillars under the policy of *CSR the Netherlands*. They buttress a number of activities, as organising encounters of groups of front runners, presenting CSR to branches, chambers of commerce and communal councils, entertaining a web site and publishing a regular newsletter, next to contributing to the resolution proclaimed by the Dutch government to have reached within five years a situation in which all its procurements are made sustainable, but also activities to inform SMEs about risks and possibilities of setting up a business in distinct emerging markets, and arranging annually a massive event for partners and interested parties. The activities are highly divergent. They partly profit from specific features of present-day Dutch society that offer starting points for an articulate CSR policy. Among them are a lively culture of public debate, openness for corporate, environmental, and social responsibilities, a tradition of consensus-seeking that includes public and political as well as private parties, as exemplified by the SER, mentioned above, and a meticulously structured set of institutions that covers the main areas of public life, and results in an exceptionally raked society (Spence, Jeurissen and Rutherfoord 2000). The question remains open, however, to what extent all this can be transplanted to areas beyond the Dutch borders.

This finally faces us with a statement, meant as an objection that often is heard, also in circles of SMEs. It says: ‘To commit oneself to CSR basically is a political choice. To develop a policy of CSR, or to stay out of it, ultimately depends on political preferences that seldom end in conformity. And in any event, SMEs are incapable of changing the dominant course of political convictions.’ There is some truth in the statement, next to some untruth and a lot of ambiguity. The truth is that, yes, commitment to CSR is also a political choice, like so many other vital decisions. True is further that a full political harmony is very unlikely to be found in this world. Untrue is the statement about the incapacity of SMEs. A single SME may be incapable to resist current political predominance, but, united, SMEs are not. And ambiguous is the idea of politics entailed in the objection. There is more politics than is represented in political parties, and there is more constructive vitality than in politics alone. One of the promising elements in current developments is that CSR is largely flourishing outside the domain of political parties. Commitment to CSR can be understood as a new form of being active in politics, or a form of being active in new politics. That turns the objection into a blessing in disguise.

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