

# Unlocking the social domain in sustainable development

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in sustainable  
development

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Beginning with a multitude of differing definitions and theories of CSR and sustainability, an analysis of the effects and impacts of the social domain to remain an untapped resource to strengthen and merge the practice of sustainable development. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Utilizing a systematic review of literature between 1977 and 2013 about CSR and sustainability definitions and theories to reveal knowledge fragmentation in the use of the social domain and its implications within sustainable development.

**Findings** – Identifies the gaps of the social domain in sustainable development and raises awareness to advance sustainable development beyond current sustainable development strategies, initiatives and practices. The pertinent publications from the inclusion and exclusion criteria in the systematic literature review were analyzed to determine how the social domain is used and interpreted in CSR and sustainability. Based upon the findings, four themes represent the social domain as socio-economics, stakeholders, societal well-being and social sustainability with suggestions for further research.

**Research limitations/implications** – The systematic literature review searched one academic search engine and focussed on journals and books written in English.

**Originality/value** – The contribution of the paper highlights, first, how an underdeveloped social domain can contribute toward multiple meanings of sustainable development and the social domain's untapped capacity to develop a clearer standard definition of sustainable development and second, the potential to advance competitive advantage for corporations and governments.

**Keywords** Sustainable development, Social responsibility, Competitive advantage, Corporate social reporting

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Sustainable development is increasingly gaining global importance across all sectors and industries and has become standard reporting for corporations and governments. However, the current meanings and definitions of sustainable development are often used interchangeably with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability and are constructed broadly with no standard meaning or definition leading to a plethora of social responsibility reporting and practices.

The attention of the social domain within the environmental and economic domains is ascertained by academic scholars, resulting in an increasing growing number of academic and practitioner journal and book publications. However, there is very little research of how knowledge fragmentation in the social domain can lead to multiple definitions of sustainable development. Consequently, the social domain in sustainable development is the most underdeveloped and least discussed (Opp and Saunders, 2013). Furthermore, most academic scholars mention a limited aspect of the social domain in CSR and sustainability without further discussion of the social domain's unclear definition and underdeveloped role in sustainable development.

The aim of this paper is to address the knowledge fragmentation in the social domain of CSR and sustainability through a systematic literature review of the academic journals and books with suggestions for future research. Based on the literature review findings,



this paper proposes that the social domain in sustainable development is the gateway to better understanding of how the social domain can contribute toward a standard definition of sustainable development. The systematic literature review indicates how the current definitions of the social domain contribute toward differing understandings of the social domain in sustainability and CSR. Consequently, knowledge fragmentation in sustainable development is generated by an underdeveloped social domain in which the current knowledge of the social domain is dispersed within numerous academic publications. As a result, this prevents a deeper thoughtful and critical examination of the social domain's potential to merge shared understanding in sustainable development and to advance sustainable development through competitive advantage among corporations, governments and local communities.

### Methodology

The objective of the systematic literature review is to comprehensively scope and understand a subject for evidence of undertaking further research (Hidalgo Landa *et al.*, 2011) while following appropriate procedures (Hemingway and Brereton, 2009). The search terms "corporate social responsibility social domain" and "sustainability social domain" were performed in Google Scholar academic search engine in February 2012. The aim of the initial search was to identify literature about the social domain in CSR and sustainability. The search terms were conducted in English. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were implemented to highlight a specific topic within the broad literature of CSR and sustainability. The inclusion criteria focussed on titles and abstracts relevant to the social domain in CSR and sustainability. Exclusion criteria included papers focussed primarily on the economic and environmental or other domains of CSR and sustainability. Peer and non-referred journals that did not highlight the social domain in the initial search were omitted, resulting in 440 pertinent publications. The process of applying and refining the criteria resulted in 149 papers focusing on the social domain in CSR and sustainability. The next step required reviewing the full text to identify themes of the social domain in CSR and sustainability by the author and one reviewer. If a paper referred to more than one theme, then the paper was assigned to all themes. A second search was conducted in April 2013 utilizing the same search engine to ensure a comprehensive literature review, resulting in six additional papers. In addition, a review of the references in the pertinent papers dating from 1977 to 2013 was cross-checked to identify additional relevant literature. A variety of publications emerged within the criteria process. However, journals were the primary source for establishing relevant research. Most papers refer to the social domain as socio-economics (67), followed by stakeholders, (62) and societal well-being, (21) with some journals defining the social domain as social sustainability (five).

#### *Four themes defining the social domain in CSR and sustainability*

*Theme 1: Socio-economics.* Socio-economics play a significant construct in CSR (Garriga and Mele, 2004). However, that role has not developed the social domain of CSR and sustainability because most social domain initiatives are not intended to tackle social issues beyond socio-economics. Similarly, Mihelcic *et al.* (2003) defines the social domain within sustainability as socio-economic driven to ensure "that humankind's use of natural resources and cycles do not lead to diminished quality of life due either to losses in future economic opportunities or to adverse impacts on social conditions, human health and the environment" (p. 5315). Likewise, Turner, II *et al.* (2003) define the human conditions as

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social/human capital and endowments (e.g. population, entitlements, institutions, economic structures). Moreover, neo-classical economics determines how people respond to the cost of gains and losses in environmental inquiry (Daly, 1977; Ekins, 1992; Jacobs, 1991; Norgaard, 1994; Redclift, 1999) indicating an economic role of the social domain in CSR and sustainability that leads to focusing on economic themes and impacts in sustainable development and defining the social domain as economic driven.

*Theme 2: stakeholders.* Stakeholders are an obvious component of a corporation's success and are a primary method of CSR (Freeman, 1984; Alkhafaji, 1989; Anderson, 1989; Brummer, 1991; Brenner and Cochran, 1991; Clarkson, 1991; Goodpaster, 1991; Hill and Jones, 1992; Hosseini and Brenner, 1992; Meznar *et al.*, 1990; Preston and Sapienza, 1990; Wood, 1991; Prahalad and Hamel, 1994) that is often driven by the stakeholders (Carroll, 1979, 1999; Wood and Jones, 1995). Generally, stakeholders can be defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Consequently, how stakeholders should be considered and categorized is questionable (Lepineux, 2003). Apparently, society is described as stakeholders (De Bakker *et al.*, 2005). Noren (2004) describes stakeholders as "trade unions, owners, shareholders, investors, bankers, auditors, insurance companies, consumers, staff, financial analysts, suppliers, customers, competitors, future employees, media, NGOs, national authorities, local authorities, neighbors, surrounding environment (environment, public health and safety, sustainable development), and politicians" (p. 8). However, Clarkson (1995) classifies stakeholders as suppliers, customers, employees, shareholders and community, and suggests corporations must deal with stakeholders and not society. Some CSR scholars suggest that the stakeholder theory consists of descriptive (no moral value statements) and normative (moral value statements) aims (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Garriga and Mele, 2004; Loranzo, 2005; Ulrich, 2008). However, "stakeholder mismatching" (Wood and Jones, 1995, p. 229) suggests limitations of relationships between corporations and society and the social domain in general leading to defining the social domain as simply people.

*Theme 3: societal well-being.* Societal well-being (Prescott-Allen, 2001) plays a central role in CSR and sustainability.

For example, Prieto-Carron *et al.* (2006) focus on poverty reduction in developing countries of the global South and suggest "that a critical research agenda needs to be concerned with the creation of new ways of systematically assessing the impact of CSR social issues such as poverty, wages and workers' and conditions in general" (p. 983). Noren (2004) proposes corporations improve societal well-being through protection of their workforce. Likewise, "businesses are to effectively promote societal well-being because they exist as a response to a social need, and have a privileged financial position in the society" (Iamandi, 2007, p. 7). However, varying dimensions of social life reveal progression and regression within societal plans may not result in positive advancement (Meadowcroft, 1999) because individuals are autonomous and are free to create value for themselves within mutual interests of stakeholders and without reciprocation to others. Therefore, "developing impact assessment" (Prieto-Carron *et al.*, 2006, p. 986) of the internal processes of the social domain in CSR and sustainability and not external human well-being outcomes is warranted.

*Theme 4: social sustainability.* The interest in sustainability is challenging traditional disciplinary thinking in the social sciences (Redclift, 1999). The societal component of sustainability is generally defined as societal structures, institutions and social capital (Spangenberg, 1997). Further to this, Bossel's (2000) system of basic orientators includes

reproduction, psychological needs and responsibility that depict the human elements within the environmental basic orientators. However, Littig and GrieBier (2005) question societal change within social processes and structures to ensure the chances for development of future generations. Blindheim (2011) suggests attaining the common good in sustainability is contingent upon the legitimate operations and design of political institutions. However, there are many differing actors within society that need to be addressed. Consequently, social sustainability may constrain collective human behavior through multiple and differing social construction and prompt inquiry into whether sustainability is a collective outcome, resulting in a limited role of social sustainability within the social domain, and generating multiple practices and definitions of sustainable development.

### **Discussion, implications and future research**

As it has been established in the preceding sections, socio-economics, stakeholders, societal well-being and social sustainability overlap and work together to form the primary constructs in the social domain. The systematic literature review indicates that the literature in CSR and sustainability depict the social domain broadly within pre-existing societal outcomes intertwined across disciplines. As a result, a solid clear definition of the social domain is difficult to locate because a divided society is constructing sustainable development and contributes toward multiple definitions and theories of sustainable development.

The literatures of CSR and sustainability are complex social phenomenon that focus on social sustainability, socio-economics and societal well-being within corporations and governments and are driven and measured by local community, stakeholder interests and corporate management (Clarkson, 1995; Cooper and Owen, 2007; Godfrey and Hatch, 2007; Gond and Crane, 2008; Gond and Matten, 2007; Johnson and Onwuguegbuzie, 2004; Marquis *et al.*, 2007; Matten *et al.*, 2003; Newell, 2005; Owen, 2008; Pater and Van Lierop, 2006). This results in a narrow social domain that creates a multitude of definitions within sustainable development and obscures the potential of the social domain to limit and constrain a shared understanding of sustainable development. As a result, there is much literature published about the role of CSR and sustainability for corporations and governments (Clarkson, 1995; Williams and Aguilera, 2008), and very little about the role of the social domain. In addition, environmental and economic domains are addressed greater than the social domain (Opp and Saunders, 2013). Further to this, there are neglected and one-sided social domain concepts of sustainability and CSR (Littig and GrieBier, 2005; Marquis *et al.*, 2007; Wiersum, 1995) as presented in the themes from the systematic literature review.

The social domain in CSR and sustainability requires future research to critically evaluate the potential of the social domain to generate multiple definitions of sustainable development. How do socio-economics, stakeholders, societal well-being and social sustainability fuse to become the social domain? It can be argued it is due to unregulated CSR and sustainability reporting (Mersereau and Mottis, 2011). Society is socially constructing the social domain responsibility rules and frameworks for communicating the role of corporations and governments social responsibility within the International Labor Organization (ILO), UN Global Compact, Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI), Socially Responsible Investing (SRI), and Integrated Reporting (IR). These frameworks seek to institutionalize CSR and sustainability on a global level through the creation of social norms, rules and standardized social

procedures, thereby decreasing convergence of sustainable development. Moreover, since social preferences are heterogeneous, it is inevitable that not all societal values will be fully reflected in policy, resulting in multiple definitions of sustainable development. Therefore, differing societal norms and values play an integral role in developing a solid definition of the social domain. Consequently, corporations and governments have heterogeneous values and preferences that may be shared and diffused. Likewise, “society’s values and current levels of knowledge are reflected in companies’ activities and companies are judged according to current standards” (Van Marrewijk and Were, 2003; Noren, 2004). In addition, “social and environmental performances are not seen as an end in themselves but as a source of competitive advantage or a condition to be competitive” (Valor, 2005, p. 199). Therefore, it can be argued, non-reciprocal societal standards require further research to decrease multiple definitions of sustainable development.

Sustainable development is often utilized as a strategic approach for competitive advantage of many companies (Collins and Porras, 1996; Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Makower, 1994; Scott and Rothman, 1992; Dutta *et al.*, 1995; Reinhardt, 1998), and is a driver of competitive advantage (Donaldson and Preston, 1995), corporate reputation (Porter and Kramer, 2006; McWilliams *et al.* 2006; Branco and Rodrigues, 2006) and sustainable competitive advantage (King, 2002; Adams and Zutshi, 2004). As a result, governments are viewing CSR codes of conduct as a cost-effective means to enhance sustainable development strategies and as a component of their national competitiveness strategies to compete and position their exports globally (Petkoski and Twose, 2003). In contrast, Marcus and Anderson (2006) research findings indicate various factors that influence CSR and competitive advantage. For example, progressive corporations and financial institutions view CSR and sustainable investments as a competitive advantage or a minimum requirement for risk mitigation (Petkoski and Twose, 2003). Likewise, managing community relations may reduce risk thereby creating an opportunity for competitive advantage (Berman *et al.*, 1999).

Since competitive advantage is a driver in sustainable development, future research should address the role of the social domain to advance competitive advantage in sustainable development. For example, “the sustainability of human – environment systems is determined through three main characteristics: resilience to disturbances, both natural and anthropogenic; desirability to human societies and (often implicit) temporal and spatial scale boundaries” (Mayer, 2007, p. 278). Therefore, competing human systems should be reflected in the social domain of sustainable development to reveal competing and unequal social responsibility among local communities, governments and corporations. Further to this, relational motives can drive new norms that articulate social expectations for business (Scott, 2004). Moreover, relational motives within a company’s industry group may often depress a company’s instrumental motives (Aguilera *et al.*, 2007). Likewise, Bansal and Roth (2000) data findings suggest that companies may be significantly motivated by relationships followed by instrumental motives with moral motives as least significant. However, the admittance of societal responsibility and social competitiveness values in the societal progress indexes (Becic *et al.*, 2012) warrant further research of the important role of the social domain in sustainable development.

## Conclusion

The literature review highlights that the social domain in sustainable development plays a strong role in decreasing multiple definitions and theories of sustainable development. Moreover, the social domain switches roles within socio-economics,

stakeholders, societal well-being and social sustainability, resulting as an untapped resource to advance sustainable development. The themes have important implications for addressing multiple definitions and theories of sustainable development. Therefore, creating a clear definition of the social domain is vital for sustainable development and for establishing competitive advantage as the role and responsibility of not only the economic domain, but also the social domain in sustainable development. Thus, it can be argued that competitive advantage in CSR and sustainability is economic and not socially driven because society does not compete at business levels, thereby leaving corporations to compete economically.

Clearly, the social domain plays a key role to reshape and develop a standard definition for sustainable development. This paper has shed light on how the social domain has played a limited role in CSR and sustainability practices and strategies in corporations and governments. Public attitudes about CSR and sustainability require awareness of society's role and responsibility to advance sustainable development beyond current CSR and sustainability industry and policy stakeholder practices. Social fragmentation among local communities, governments and corporations in CSR and sustainability will decrease because the social domain will become a driver of sustainable development instead of a support mechanism for economic and environmental development. Overall, the social domain in sustainable development requires further research and a deeper understanding of individual preferences and decision-making in defining CSR and sustainability because a competing society sustains itself by efficacy capacity.

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### Further reading

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#### **About the author**

Dr Monica Thiel is a Member of the Academy of Management and the European Group for Organizational Studies. Her research articles and case studies have been published in the *American Journal of Economics and Business Administration*, *International Journal of Business and Globalization*, *Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases*, *Elsevier Ltd. Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, and the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*. Prior to her pursuit of a PhD in Social Science at the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Monica worked in multinational corporations, non-profit organizations, government, military, and small-medium enterprises in business management and social responsibility initiatives. Her current research interests include corporate social responsibility, sustainability, competitiveness, strategic management and innovation. Dr Monica Thiel can be contacted at: [mt2652@gmail.com](mailto:mt2652@gmail.com)

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