

Is there any such thing as “Global Corporate Citizenship”?

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This paper addresses a series of questions which examine the assumptions behind the phrase ‘global corporate citizenship’. It is not the purpose of this paper to undermine the aspiration for companies to shoulder more of their responsibilities to society and the environment. That aspiration, which is often called CSR (corporate social responsibility), can be generally positive. But is ‘corporate citizenship’ just another name for CSR? If it is, it will need to address the many criticisms which have been leveled at CSR, that:

- it is unclear what it actually means or how to define it
- it is largely undertaken for PR purposes and has little ethical content
- its predominantly voluntary nature means that it typically achieves little in relation to the scale of social and environmental challenges.

If it is not, and the phrase ‘global corporate citizenship’ suggests far more than simply shouldering responsibility, then there are further questions which need to be addressed. Most of these stem from the word ‘citizenship’ which, as applied to companies, suggests that:

- companies can be people
- companies can be members of society
- companies can be citizens.

In addition, the phrase ‘global corporate citizenship’ implies that there is a meaningful sense in which corporate citizenship operates on a global scale. The remainder of this paper addresses each of these questions in turn.