

Foreword

Like societies elsewhere, European societies face serious social and environmental challenges, ranging from an ageing population and social exclusion to industrial restructuring and climate change mitigation. In order to address such complex challenges, all sectors of society need to contribute, including business, consumers, policy makers, academia and the media. Business' contribution to sustainability in this context is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is understood by the European Commission as a 'concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis'. CSR can therefore promote sustainability while enhancing Europe's innovative potential and competitiveness.

In the European Union the debate on the role of CSR started in the late 1990s. It intensified as of 2001 with the publication of a Green Paper and the 2002 launch of the EU Multi-Stakeholder Forum on CSR chaired by the Commission. The European CSR strategy was further developed through two Commission Communications from 2002 and 2006 and through the backing of a new European CSR Alliance as an umbrella for responsibly minded enterprises.

As the Commission and European Parliament have stressed, it is now time to move the debate to the material and measurable outcomes and impact of voluntary business contributions – the acid test for CSR. While CSR cannot replace social and environmental regulation, this book shows how it contributes to a number of public policy objectives, including investment in skills development, efficient use of natural resources, human rights and poverty reduction. However, the precondition for this is that CSR should deliver on its social and environmental promises. More knowledge of CSR's actual impact on sustainability, its potential and its limits as a governance instrument is hence crucial to developing effective policy mixes for sustainable development.

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I hope that the lessons learned will be welcomed by a wide audience among CSR practitioners, policy makers, civil society and academia.

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