Social Responsibility Beyond Neoliberalism and Charity Volume 2: Social Responsibility - Sustainability, Education and Management

Description:
Social transformation is unpredictable. New technologies and modes of production indicate that social innovation is necessary, but they say little about the exact nature of the ensuing social change. The pressures for change often originate from different and unconnected sources and only after the necessary passage of time it may become clear which among them -technological, economic, ideological, political or cultural - has made the critically important contribution and how they eventually gel into a new social reality. Calls for a generalized change of paradigm can be useful as a means of pressure yet they usually do not contribute much in real terms. A careful analysis of praxis is necessary to discern the elements of change and to propose the desired direction.

The present volume tries to do precisely that. It explores a wide array of evolving practices which tend to strengthen social responsibility in various areas of economy and social services with the objective to help developing them into a coherent system of thought on the social responsibility needed today.

The analytical work done by the authors of the chapters in this book has to be considered in a wider context. In addition to the focus on specific aspects of social responsibility the authors express a strong link with some of the most important phenomena of social and economic development in our era.

The first and perhaps the foremost among them is the growing awareness of the need to develop a proper understanding of social responsibility as a vital requirement to overcome the current economic crisis and to open new horizons of development. This need is expressed by a wide variety of social and international actors. The voices of activists of the “Occupy Wall Street” and the “Indignados” on one hand, and the analysts of the World Economic Forum on the other warn about the same problems, although not always in exactly the same language. For example, the World Economic Forum identified, in its global risks report 2013, “a severe and growing income disparity” as one of the two main risks threatening the global economy and international community, the other being environmental degradation. This clear indication of a fundamentally dangerous social problem today calls for serious search of credible responses.

The fact that the World Economic Forum, hardly an organization known for social sensitivity and care for the poor and the excluded, put the problem of dramatic and growing income disparity among the main threats to the world, suggests that the problem has become obvious. However, its extent and corrosive nature have yet to be fully understood. Oxfam, probably one of the most experienced organizations in this field, has recently explained that the existing levels of inequality between the poor and the extremely wealthy have already become economically inefficient, politically corrosive, socially divisive and environmentally destructive. This realization is gaining ground not only among the humanitarians such as Oxfam, but also among the hard-nosed economists.

The above diagnoses are not coming as a surprise. The problem of extreme income disparity is a result of the type of development which has been prevailing over the past three decades. Profit making has been considered not only as the key to economic progress, but also as the only economically relevant form of social responsibility. Social responsibility has for a generation gone out of fashion as a value per se: it was considered, mainly, as a by-product of profit and growth. Globalization, that object of admiration of economic optimists, was welcomed as a tide that will lift all boats. Social progress was expected to come as an automatic consequence of growth. Rarely in recent history has “trickle down theory” enjoyed such an unquestioned support of the dominant economic commentators as well as of policy makers.

The financial and economic crisis in the West which started in 2007 has brought the era of unbridled economic optimism to an end. Economic tasks are increasingly seen in a conjunction with the tasks of social transformation and the question of social responsibility of business and of economic policy makers in general is becoming central in this context.

However, two notes of caution are necessary here. First, the basic function of profit in economic development remains. At present, market economy represents the only viable model of economic development. The question is how to modify its functioning so as to ensure that profit making serves the society and not vice versa. Second, the idea of social responsibility, while unfashionable, has never been
entirely absent. Even at the time of the domination of the free market ideology there have been projects which gave specific expression to the idea of social responsibility of business leaders and policy makers.

A good example was set by the “Global Compact” initiated by Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary-General, at the meeting of business leaders in Davos in January 1999. The participants were invited to introduce, on their own volition, good practices in the areas of labour standards, human rights, anti-corruption and environmental protection and engage with the UN for that purpose. Obviously, accepting such an approach means a certain burden on the competitiveness of the companies in the short run. However, it brings dividends over time. It strengthens the sense of social responsibility of the business sector and helps putting global markets on a fairer and more sustainable footing. Since 1999 more than 10,000 businesses and other stakeholders from 145 countries have joined in this initiative and it is hoped that the experience gained will help in changing business culture worldwide. The initiative also stimulates creativity with regard to social responsibility of business and helps directing it into the mainstream of business thinking and, hopefully, in the broader public opinion.

The example of the UN Global Compact shows that a general aspiration for higher levels of social responsibility exists. However, the debate still leaves much to be desired. The present book is a contribution to this much needed debate. It reflects the relevant experience from the recent past. It addresses the nature of the current crisis and the key conditions for the needed change: the need for new economic paradigms, the relevance of the rule of law, as well as the various theoretical aspects necessary for addressing the issues of social responsibility comprehensively. Moreover, it delves into the experience of socially responsible management in various areas, including in social services provided by the state. It is particularly valuable that the authors discussed the relevant issues on the basis of specific experience and history of transition from the former socialist self-management model of development to the existing market economies. Nothing was perfect in this history. But good knowledge of the actual experience of transition is a necessary condition for the identification of new solutions.

The analysis offered in this volume provides a good platform for discussion which needs to address the question of social responsibility in a holistic manner: The critique has to include all aspects of transition, while the proposals for the future have to embrace both the business sector and the system of social services provided by the state and by other actors. When the full picture is presented it might become possible to offer convincing answers to the questions raised by the civil society, which is protesting against severe income disparity and demanding social justice today, as well as to propose directions to guide the policy makers in the future.

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