

ABSTRACT

Role of business organization has been continually challenged owing to its diverse social impact and is ever evolving in the backdrop of neoliberalism and globalization. This is critical in the Global South where business organizations allegedly cause social issues, and the state's writ dwindles under powers of business. Meanwhile Civil Society (CS) has been recognized for its capacity to bring social order and economic prosperity within a democratic framework. Hence, CS is a possible contender to shape the role of business, bringing business outcomes towards social acceptance and common good. However, in the Global South, despite availability of formal mechanisms CS does not demonstrate an active interest to carry out its role, hence makes a problem condition: 'Why does civil society fail to engage with business'. That demands an explanation, which this study has explored. The problem and associated phenomena raised the questions a) How does the civil society's engagement with business take place?; b) What conditions facilitate civil society's engagement with business against social issues caused by business?; c) Why does civil society generally detach from business?; d) How does business respond to civil society?

The theoretical lens the study primarily employs, the Deliberative Democracy Theory (DDT) by Habermas (1996), underscores the role of CS to identify social issues, take into public sphere for deliberation, reach moral agreement and common good. Also, it claims deliberation results in public opinion that forms social power. However, DDT has not explained the failure of CS to engage in finding solutions despite having social issues by business. This study sought support for theorization from a) Social Movement Theory (SMT) that defines the problem with culture and rules, and socializes the issue (Salman & Assies, 2017); b) Social Connectedness that explains feeling of belongingness extends the social relationships forming collectiveness (Lopez, 2006); c) Social Media that enables deliberation among networked community (Langman, 2005); and d) Three Dimensional Power (Lukes, 2005) that describes latent power willingly subjecting to dominance foregoing resistance: which is a character in society.

Research philosophy in this study is of interpretivism. Qualitative Research Design and Multiple Embedded Case Study Method were employed to explore CS's engagement in Global South, with support of experiences in Sri Lanka. Three incidents where business organizations allegedly caused social issues, with varied degrees of CS engagements, seen through 51 interviews, two focus groups, 62 documents, four videos and three observations were used in data collection. Data was analyzed through Thematic Analysis method.

It was found that if CS comprehends adverse experiences of irresponsible business conduct flowing from transactional relationships, such issues were retained in private sphere devoid of translating to a common issue in the public sphere. That negated possibility of collective action. However, CS initiated active engagement when adverse outcomes went beyond transactional relationships adding sentiments and emotions. In addition, in societies enjoying connectedness, the issue being close to self, the prevailing governance structure and the ability to form identity have offered impetus to engagement. Conversely, individualistic nature, affordability to find own solutions and latent power, have waned off engagement. Moreover, social media has not been a consistent contributor. In light of its relationship with business, CS sees business with underlined mistrust, sans mutuality, keeps it beyond self, and fears to engage. These perceptions at times are not real but are manifested by antagonism prompted by social and political upbringing that discourage private investments and profits. Business in general sees society as a transactional partner, undermining human esteem, and fails to recognize a holistic view and solutions based on engagement and shared understanding.

This study makes theoretical contribution towards DDT explaining why CS does not engage, and identifies conditions that enable engagement which are not instinctive as DDT claims. Moreover, it extends the application of DDT to Global South, addressing its critics' concerns of its applicability elsewhere. Management theories, mainly Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), are shaped by explaining the behaviour patterns of Sri Lankan CS and business organizations towards each other ensuing implications to mutual progress. Neoliberalism is extended with explanation on its lack of receptiveness and its vulnerability in different societies. Finally, an emerging model depicting the findings, the social process and conditions facilitating or antithetical of CS engagement with business, too are presented.

Practitioners are provided with a framework to integrate with social actors through deliberation for opinion gathering, dissemination of social-business concerns, shaping and modification of public opinion. That enables better understanding and addressing of power bases, creating and receiving public consent. Managers can define role of business, design CSR activities to prioritize conflict resolution, understand and nurture social views. NGO sector would be able to identify areas that are attractive for volunteerism, collectiveness, and policy makers will be able to recognize areas in Public Private Partnerships (PPPs).

Study carries limitations owing to cases spanning through space of five to six years where social, political, economic conditions may have changed, thus, public comprehension too.