

INTERVIEW WITH FRANK WIJEN

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Frank, can you explain to us what you specialize in at Rotterdam School of Management?

My three main activities are teaching, research, and management. I lecture on research methodology, international business, and corporate sustainability. My research focuses predominantly on transnational environmental governance: ways in which business, government, and civil society can effectively regulate environmental commons that stretch across borders (such as climate change). In terms of management activities, I am the Academic Coordinator of Sustainable RSM, a project of the business school seeking to integrate sustainable business into teaching, research, and our own operations.

At our November conference CSR in action 2013, you had an opportunity to hear a few examples of how companies in CZ approach corporate responsibility. These were not only multinationals, but also SMEs. Do you see any differences between the situation here and in the Netherlands?

I was pleased to notice several sensible initiatives taken by Czech-based firms. Generally speaking, companies in the Netherlands seem to be ahead in terms of integrating environmental and social issues into their business activities. Government regulation and public opinion have driven many firms to be relatively proactive. Projects undertaken by Czech companies seem to be more on an ad-hoc basis and less related to their core business activities.

In your opinion, in which aspects could Czech companies “learn” from their Dutch counterparts, or possibly vice versa?

Several of the Czech initiatives presented pertain to charity. Such projects are great, but may not have the same impact as making responsible practices part and parcel of corporate

core activities. The business of business is doing business. Therefore, companies have the highest potential to ‘make a difference’ when using their capabilities to develop and integrate social and environmental aspects into their mainstream business activities. Dutch companies generally have well-developed organizational skills, which have led to important savings of natural resources, better working conditions, and, consequently, higher financial performance.

Dutch companies can learn from their Czech counterparts that relevant socio-environmental issues are not the same everywhere and that their approach may not be effective everywhere. The Dutch like to preach and export their normative standards. They expect others to assimilate their norms and operating procedures, but are often insufficiently open towards considering foreign norms and practices.

Where do you think the Dutch companies stand in terms of measuring the impact of CSR on business, in comparison with the Czech ones?

This really depends. Large Dutch companies in manufacturing are relatively advanced in terms of assessing their environmental impact. This is logical, because they have ample human and financial resources to do so and because the material aspects of manufacturing are relatively easy to assess. By contrast, Dutch companies that are smaller or in services tend to be less advanced in terms of impact measurement. The same seems to count for Czech-based companies that are part of (Dutch) multinationals. My impression is that domestic Czech firms still have a lot of untapped potential to measure their CSR impact.

By the way, it should be kept in mind that relational aspects (like gaining legitimacy) and the moral dimension (such as ‘doing the right thing’) may also be important drivers of CSR but are very hard to measure.

Do you participate in similar CSR events in your home country? What are they focused on?

There are many CSR events taking place in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Some are generic in nature, others are more specialized (e.g., focusing on closed-loop supply chains, the bottom- of-the-pyramid philosophy, or designing for the environment). It strikes me that (business) organizations partaking in such events like to promote their socio-environmental achievements. It is obviously good to celebrate achievements, but it is even more useful to critically chart and openly discuss unsolved socio-environmental challenges, since this is the best opportunity to realize most progress in terms of responsible business models and activities.

