

Tough social issues provide a challenge for companies and researchers

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Multinational companies are facing tough issues like climate change, poverty and human rights. A new study published in the *Journal of World Business* suggests that they are increasingly seen to have a responsibility to support sustainable development.

The study, authored by Professor Ans Kolk from the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, has been selected by an independent advisory board to be given the *Atlas* award, recognizing the impact it has on people's lives around the world.

In the study, Prof. Kolk looks back at over 50 years of research in three main areas of social responsibility: the environment, ethics, and poverty and sustainable development. Her article tracks changes in the way researchers have approached these three broad topics, providing context and explaining what was affecting the changes at the time.

"Corporate [social responsibility](#) (CSR) has been around for decades as a concept, and there has been a lot of research on it since the 1960s," Prof. Kolk explained. "*The Journal of World Business* was turning 50 so I looked at the journal's articles related to CSR since 1965, and compared it to other main publications to get a picture of how the field overall has changed. I also indicated which areas we should focus on more—or less."

Prof. Kolk found that in the last decades, society's expectations have shifted significantly. The arrival of the internet has enabled people to put

more pressure on companies to "do the right thing". Rather than waiting to be attacked, companies should prepare themselves and proactively address their impact on the world.

One way to help companies tackle this is to focus research on how issues like [human rights](#), inequality and the impending energy transition are connected to international strategy, and on how businesses can operate in weak states and settings characterized by social dislocation.

To make this happen, [sustainable development](#) research needs more coverage in international business journals. Prof. Kolk believes companies need to be more flexible and take a "braver approach" to CSR by publishing more unconventional, even exploratory work.

Prof. Jonathan Doh, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of World Business, explained the importance of the study: "Ans Kolk provides a comprehensive account of the relationships among different social and environmental considerations in the global business environment. She also documents the evolving nature of these concepts in the international business and management literature and their connection to real world phenomena. This is truly a first rate review and retrospective with important messages for the future trajectory of this critical domain."

More information: The article is "The social responsibility of international business: From ethics and the environment to CSR and sustainable development", by Ans Kolk ([DOI: 10.1016/j.jwb.2015.08.010](#)). The article appears in Journal of World Business, Vol. 51, Issue 1 (January 2016) pages 23-34.

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