Global Business Citizenship: A Public Role for Corporations

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Scholars in business ethics and business and society have long argued that business today not only provides private goods to customers and profits to stockholders, but is responsible to other stakeholders, such as employees, and to society at large. This paper presents recent thinking on corporate responsibility based upon the view that business plays a public role in society. A recent formulation of firms’ public role is “global business citizenship” that uses the citizen metaphor so as to emphasize firms’ responsibility for protecting human liberty, social justice, and human flourishing in global and local business ventures. Third Sector scholars and practitioners should familiarize themselves with these views on business as part of their ongoing effort to map the interaction among the sectors; for polemical use in protecting their constituencies; and to further dialogue with firms, especially multinational corporations, so as to establish codes of conduct, agreements on the manufacture and marketing of dangerous products, and the resolution of other problems such as employment practices and environmental protections. The paper argues for business’s public character; it examines stakeholder theory and global business citizenship; and it concludes with remarks on NGO strategies for encouraging corporate responsibility; codes of conduct; and the Global Compact, a promising venue for furthering multi-sector discussion and agreement.