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Private, but Public: how companies manage their quasi-governmental roles and responsibilities

Boundaries are blurring, and with increasing demands for firms to engage in global corporate citizenship, the pressure to take on roles and responsibilities normally the preserve of public actors is greater than ever before. This involves a range of quasi-governmental activities and functions from providing health care and education for local communities to the development of political capacity and public policy. Questions remain about whether private actors should be involved in such public responsibilities, and indeed about which areas of activity business should engage. As numerous examples have shown, the public arena is a minefield for private companies unused to discharging the kind of political accountability faced by public actors. Drawing on case study research in developing countries, this presentation will examine why and how firms have been drawn into the public arena, and will explain the benefits and drawbacks of the typical strategies they deploy to manage their quasi-governmental roles and responsibilities.