

Food Fortification and Corporate Citizenship in Africa

Corporate Citizenship (CC) is defined as the relationship between the private sector and society, including the immediate employees, shareholders, and the wider society, with particular reference to how the private sector contributes to sustainable development. Other terms used to refer to this relationship are corporate social investment, corporate sustainability, or corporate social responsibility (CSR). CC is based on the understanding that in the long term corporate needs will only be met if the needs of the broader society are met. In Africa, in particular, corporate citizenship extends beyond the conventional 'do no harm' principle, to an active engagement in support of environmental and social development (Agbazue, n.d.).

The African Institute of Corporate Citizenship proposes three levels of commitment to sustainability in companies:

1. Limited Corporate Social Investment, involving largely financial support and gifts in kind, according to a traditional philanthropic model.
2. Active Corporate Social Responsibility, involving active support to government and civil society initiatives, including involvement of staff in volunteering assignments, consultancy support, and secondments.
3. Pro-active integrated corporate citizenship. Companies aspiring to be leaders in the field link their core business strategy and their corporate citizen strategy. Thus they make decisions about supply chain management and other business linkages in ways that would support the broader sustainable development agenda.

Although the formal concept of CC / CSR is relatively new in Africa, the idea that business is part of society, with responsibilities to the people of a country or region, is widely established. It could be seen as an expression of the African philosophy of Ubuntu. Businesses, like people, achieve their full potential through engagement with others. Companies are seen to have a responsibility to 'give something back' to the society. At present, most companies associate CSR with philanthropy, or corporate giving in the form of donations, particularly to causes such as health and medical provision, education, HIV/Aids, agriculture and food security, and underprivileged children. Sponsorship of sporting events and cultural ceremonies are also popular forms of corporate giving in Africa. Workplace issues, such as labor standards and decent wages are emerging as key CSR issues in African countries (Kivuitu et al, 2005).

In the African context, there is often a lack of capacity in government and civil society to enforce compliance with formal CSR standards, and few incentives, beyond the general sense of responsibility to 'give something back,' for companies to extend their corporate citizenship. Building capacity for the oversight functions, creating opportunities for the three sectors to develop a shared understanding of CC, and localizing CC to fit African realities are important tasks to be undertaken to strengthen the private sector's contribution to Africa's development (Agbazue, n.d.).

A range of regional and national organizations have emerged during the last decade to support CC in Africa.

Corporate Citizenship and the Food Sector.

Many observers and business leaders in the food sector maintain that CC / CSR is simply how companies do good business (IBLF2002). CC opportunities exist at all stages of the value chain, including sourcing of agricultural products, environmental and labor standards in production plants, and nutritional and health benefits of the products. There are also wider opportunities including through participation in policy dialogue, and outreach to communities.

Thus, IBLF (2002) suggests four levels at which food manufacturers can engage with the CC/ CSR agenda:

1. Core business: How can manufacturing and marketing food and beverage products create social and shareholder value?
2. Value chain: How can companies work with those directly upstream and downstream in the value chain to promote CSR?
3. Host communities: How can value be created for the people living in the vicinity of the manufacturing operation?
4. How can companies contribute to policy dialogue about public goods and other public policy issues beyond immediate commercial interest?

(From Food for Thought: Corporate Social Responsibility for food and beverage managers. International Business Leaders Forum. 2002).

Food Fortification and Corporate Citizenship

Companies processing basic commodities may not see themselves as playing a major role in addressing social and environmental issues. Yet by providing basic commodities at competitive prices, and doing so in a way that supports environmental sustainability and social equity, they can indeed be major players. Fortifying basic foods with the vitamins and minerals needed for an active healthy life serves an important public health goal and can thus be a vital dimension of a company's corporate citizenship strategy. It is also part of the core business of the company. Companies can thus use their participation in a national or regional fortification program as the keystone of a pro-active corporate citizenship program.

Employee training on the benefits of fortification could spark innovation in product development, and could inspire employees to become involved in outreach activities to improve nutrition in their own communities. By actively including messages on fortification and nutrition in their engagement with distributors and retailers, and highlighting the health messages in marketing and in their social outreach programs, there can be a seamless connection between core business strategy and corporate citizen strategy. These initiatives can be enhanced through creative partnership arrangements with NGOs, multilateral organizations, and government agencies.

Resources

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