

# **Managing Corporate Social Responsibility for Rural Development in Least Developed Countries**

**Conference Room Paper**

**by**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper examines some issues related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), identifies key ingredients for effective partnerships, and explores what it takes to make this work. The main focus is on managing the CSR component of partnerships in relation to rural development. The paper draws on recent research findings. It explores sets of issues that are closely related to needs of Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The paper identifies several priorities and highlights some country examples. It underlines the importance of underpinning CSR by a strong business case. It showcases some ways of combining corporate profits with real development benefits. Finally, the paper offers policy recommendations and mentions several larger issues.

This paper is a contribution to the UN Public-Private Alliance for Rural Development (UN Alliance), which builds upon on the CSR model and promotes partnerships of willing government, business and other stakeholders.

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## **1. Introduction**

Public-private partnerships as an instrument for rural development is receiving increased attention in the international community. The idea of linking for-profit business with the broad concerns of governments for economic and social development, and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is becoming increasingly manifested in a growing family of efforts, within and outside the UN system. In view of the opportunities and challenges facing such efforts, it is useful to identify some areas of CSR-prompted intervention that are conducive to LDC rural development. Also, insights and evidence from the debate on CSR may produce some practical advice on the partnerships approach.

## **2. The International Community's Renewed Attention to Rural Development**

Tackling poverty at its roots means tackling rural underdevelopment in 50 LDCs – 34 of which are in Africa. Four-fifths of Africa's poorest live in rural areas and depend largely on agriculture for their livelihood. Thus, without accelerated economic growth among poor people in rural areas, poverty will not be reduced significantly, especially in LDCs or Africa.

Focusing on rural rather than urban economic growth can also be more effective in poverty reduction. The regional and sectoral composition of a national rate of poverty reduction affects the rate of poverty reduction, with far stronger responses to rural economic growth than to urban. In particular, agriculture and related services have been found particularly effective in poverty reduction, with industrial growth less so (World Bank, 2003, p. 54)

Notwithstanding the above, rural development has been viewed in some quarters as a “sunset industry”—one which is either growing slowly or declining (World Bank and IFAD, 2003). In the case of Africa, public investment in agriculture has indeed been decreasing for many years (OECD, 2004; IRIN News, 20/1/2003). Most developing countries also have a pronounced urban bias in their own investments, which serves to widen the gap between rural and urban incomes and results in achieving slower than potential rate of economic growth overall (Thompson, 2001).

The ECOSOC 2003 High-Level Segment helped to focus a renewed attention by the international community upon rural development, and the outcome – a Ministerial Declaration – reaffirmed its critical importance for achieving poverty eradication and meeting MDGs. There is a greater consensus on the need to reach the rural poor, and to augment global and national resources for rural economic growth. The problem now lies not in the concept, but in the “how” to spur rural economic and social advancement, especially in LDCs.

## **3. Partnership as an Instrument: *UN Public-Private Alliance for Rural Development***

The United Nations Public-Private Alliance for Rural Development (UN Alliance) was launched against the background of the ECOSOC 2003 Ministerial Declaration, with the first pilot country, Madagascar, an African LDC. The UN Alliance is a concrete effort, linked to the ECOSOC, to bring together the main stakeholders, with a focus on one country. Its mission is to identify, highlight and promote the replication of successful business policies and practices that are both profitable and promote social and economic advancement of poor people in rural areas. Results of this win-win approach will be brought to the attention of the international community through ECOSOC.

Establishment of the UN Alliance is also indicative of the current trends in the UN's expanding role as a CSR-player and its increasing engagement in what has been called the "jazzier dance of improvisational solution-oriented partnerships" (Rash 2002, cited in: WRI News Release, 4/9/2002).

The UN Alliance is designed as a voluntary coalition of governments, business partners, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders. It is very much in line with the focus of the UN Global Compact and other voluntary, CSR-based efforts.

#### **4. Managing the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Component**

Public-private partnerships have attracted the attention of the international community, particularly since the launch of the UN Global Compact in 1999, and the convening of the International Conference on Financing for Development and the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002. The CSR component of partnerships has generated an important debate.

According to the World Bank, CSR can be broadly defined as "the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development by working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life, in ways that are both good for business and good for development."<sup>1</sup> At the heart of CSR is the idea that companies can and should integrate sustainable economic development concerns into business operations and in their interactions with stakeholders (Christian Aid 2004, p. 4)

For LDC governments, CSR-based multi-stakeholder partnerships can be seen as attractive and cost-effective means to enhance rural development strategies in settings of limited regulatory capacity. Yet, as the World Bank acknowledges,<sup>2</sup> the implementation and impact of CSR are still patchy, and the agenda still immature. As recent research shows (mainly in the context of environmental governance), accountability and legitimacy and other implications of the drive for partnerships are not yet well understood (Reinicke, 2003; Witte and Streck, 2003).

##### **4.1 Insights and Evidence**

Evidence from recent research on CSR provides the following insights: (a) the importance of skilled political leadership and management; (b) the importance and difficulty of securing real and lasting benefits; (c) the complementary nature of the CSR-based partnership approach; (d) the need for effective monitoring and assessment; and (e) the need to ensure the sustainability of partnerships.

###### **4.1.1 Benefits of partnerships**

Partnerships can be useful in presenting "nimble alternatives" to protracted multilateral negotiations. In such cases, coalitions supported by progressive stakeholders may help foster a favourable political climate and set standards for replication via examples of good practice (Hale, 2003, pp. 2-3; Schipulle, 2003, pp. 53-54).

Further benefits include: (a) partnerships' flexible and practical approach as well as their experimental quality may help resolve development problems; and (b) speedy implementation,

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<sup>1</sup> See World Bank's definition on its website about CSR (<http://www.worldbank.org/privatesector/csr/>).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

as voluntary CSR-based initiatives can help start a process of change and immediate implementation of development projects, whereas negotiated agreements may be slow to trickle into implementation (Hale, 2003, pp. 2-3; Stigson, 2003, p. 44).

Significant opportunity exists for the UN to work with business and build enthusiasm for CSR and partnerships for rural development in LDCs. Moreover, the UN can provide an important added value, by acting as a 'third party' facilitator and catalyst, by providing a vehicle for developing trust between public and private sector parties (Bennet, Grohmann and Gentry, 1999)

But if the UN is to help achieve such benefits, skilled leadership and management are needed, plus recognition that partnerships are complex political structures that evolve over time (Reinicke, 2003, p.1)

#### **4.1.2 Potential problems**

As public-private partnerships and the CSR approach develop, several issues warrant attention. In recent research and evidence (Utting, 2003, Zammit, 2003, Hale, 2003), concerns are expressed about the following:

- Power and resource imbalance among partners: Significant imbalances among government agencies, foreign investors and rural villages may result in the exclusion or cooption of smaller partners' viewpoints.
- "Blue-washing": Companies may wish to use partnerships with the UN as a showcase of sustainable development, while ignoring or diverting attention from other policies and practices.
- Impartiality principle: Through partnerships the UN or government entities may enhance a few partner companies' images and market profiles – hence jeopardising necessary impartiality.
- Distraction from the UN's 'real' work: Some commentators argue that a focus on CSR and voluntary partnerships may reduce political pressure on Member States to make binding commitments for sustainable development. According to them, the UN might better focus on the dynamics of multilateral negotiations to strengthen the international regulatory framework, rather than to promote voluntary actions (Utting (2003), Zammit (2003).

#### **4.1.3 Securing real and lasting benefits**

The evidence from recent debate on CSR versus international regulation has made clear the importance of ensuring that business CSR commitments are borne out in practice, and sustained. Adequate attention to this is needed, so that real and lasting benefits for rural people of LDCs can be secured. However, recent research shows that it is not such an obvious, easy task. A study by the NGO Christian Aid cites problems in three instances (Shell in Nigeria, British American Tobacco in Kenya and Coca-Cola in India). The study also raises another problem: Even if companies can act responsibly, their attempts to do so are likely to be partial, short-term and patchy – leaving vulnerable communities in developing countries at risk (Christian Aid 2004).

That study therefore advocates a move beyond volunteerism to corporate social accountability through mandatory international regulation, so that companies have a legal obligation to uphold international standards. It is argued that this would ensure the enforcement of real social responsibility for companies operating in poor countries (Christian Aid 2004).

#### **4.1.4 Complementary nature of partnerships**

As repeatedly stressed in the literature, voluntary partnerships cannot substitute for UN Member States' regulatory responsibility; they are to be seen as additional to sound regulatory frameworks and policies (Fonteneau, 2003; Otobo, 2004; UNIDO, 2002; Witte, Benner and Streck, 2003).

Partnerships are thus just part of the solution – at least, at the national level. The current debate on CSR, however, is centred more around the regulation of companies at the global level than at the national level.

Some, not only in the business world but also in Government agencies, maintain that emphasis on international legal frameworks may divert attention and energy away from building up national-level voluntary CSR practices. Others argue that strengthening the international legal framework or conventions may help bolster legislation at national level (Christian Aid, 2004; Fonteneau, 2003).

On balance, it can be said that CSR often needs to be framed by regulatory and contractual arrangements. Voluntary and regulatory approaches often go hand in hand; as is the case with labour standards, where both voluntary and regulatory approaches (e.g., codes of conduct, independent monitoring, and legislation) are in place. The polarization of the debate as to whether voluntary or regulatory approaches are the most effective way to achieve development benefits therefore seems not very helpful. In fact, it could be more useful to understand when and how different approaches can create business and developmental benefits and how they work together. The key is to understand how to use CSR strategically, so as effectively to harness business enthusiasm for CSR for LDC development in rural areas, while also taking advantage of “dynamic linkages between CSR-based voluntary approaches and regulation”.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4.1.5 Monitoring and assessment**

In order for partnership initiatives to make valuable contributions, strong assessment and monitoring mechanisms are required--as recommended by many experts (e.g., Witte and Streck, 2003, p.5). In addition, the initiatives need to factor in and put into place accountability from the early stages of a project, as accountability is a process to be nurtured over time.

#### **4.1.6 Sustainability of partnerships**

Another key issue is to ensure that partnership initiatives do not result in one-time spot interventions, but long-term meaningful support. Concern has been expressed that partnerships will not last long enough to have a sustained results for poverty eradication. The international community including the UN must therefore address the questions of guaranteeing the resources, time horizon and sustained political commitment to maintain the level of monitoring

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<sup>3</sup> World Bank website about CSR, Op.cit.

and scrutiny required to have a sustained impact on corporate strategies and on the lives of poor people in LDC rural communities.

The CSR-diluting effect resulting from the disbandment of the *United Nations Expert Panel on Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and other Forms of Wealth in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)* shows us why it is important for the UN to factor in the sustainability issue at an early stage in the consideration of initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

Recent criticism by the NGO Global Witness - an original backer of the “Kimberley Process” to prevent illicit diamond sales fuelling Africa’s wars - also highlights the need for sustainability and meaningful follow-up mechanisms. The self-regulation, which is supposed to cover the entire diamond-jewellery supply chain, from the mine to point of sale to the consumer, is, according to Global Witness, amounting to not much more than a public relations manoeuvre.<sup>5</sup>

## **4.2 Combining Profits with Benefits: A Win-Win Case**

Partnerships require investment of real resources, so that all partners have strong interest in seeing the partnership succeed (Bennet, E., Grohmann, P. and Gentry, B., 1999; Reinicke, 2003, p.1). Partnerships therefore need to take a practical approach, exploring innovative ways of combining profits with development benefits. In this way, strong foundations for the work of a partnership may be secured, so that it can be sustained and scaled up.

The work on collecting and identifying innovative ways of combining profits and benefits is, however, at an early stage. How to manage such partnerships in a realistic and constructive manner is a key issue.

One case study – HP Kuppam i-community - therefore warrants particular attention (Dunn and Yamashita, 2003).

The study deals with deriving business value from contributions to the development of remote rural villages surrounding Kuppam in India. HP’s investment in this area was *not just as an add-on to the business but a part of the core business strategy*. HP designed the Kuppam i-community, which enabled local entrepreneurs to build community information centres, where residents could tap into on-line government services. This was done particularly with a view to leading HP to new kinds of technology solutions that could prove valuable in India and other developing markets.

HP’s business case operates on the *strategic* level, where CSR is practised as a core part of a company’s development strategy and CSR becomes a route for learning and innovation. A major positive effect of this kind of strategic – not philanthropic – approach to Kuppam is that HP was applying the rigor and processes of a well-managed company to problems that need to be solved. HP managers approached the project as business managers, where HP’s global citizenship strategy was aligned with its business strategy to advance HP’s capabilities to provide new, innovative kinds of technology solutions.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2002, the Security Council asked the UN Secretary-General to establish this Panel with the mandate to research and analyse the links between the exploitation of the natural resources and other forms of wealth in the DRC and the continuation of the conflict. However, upon the expiry of its mandate and after having presented its final report (S/2003/1027), it has now been disbanded.

<sup>5</sup> See the article: “Retailers’ moves to combat trade in ‘blood diamonds’ criticised” (Financial Times, 3/30/2004).

In particular, this includes that HP approached the economic and social development challenges in Kuppam by investing in a serious needs-finding process of the community and transferring that understanding to the innovation process. Many of the on-line services that HP is developing are promising for applications beyond Kuppam. In addition to new products, HP is also creating intangible business assets (e.g., new networks and increased familiarity with new markets) that will have an important impact on HP's bottom line. It shows a promising way of combining real business value with development benefit, while also revealing many positive effects resulting from this win-win approach.<sup>6</sup>

### **4.3 Issues and Areas of Intervention in LDC Rural Development**

The challenge for LDC governments and the international community is then to identify CSR priorities and areas of intervention that are meaningful in the context of rural development.

For example, as UNIDO (2002) points out, it is highly desirable for foreign companies to invest in quality and management improvements of their small and medium-sized subcontractors. Support for them can be particularly meaningful given the importance of these companies as a "path out of poverty". CSR-inspired investors often insist on selecting their suppliers and subcontractors on the ability of the latter to meet the requirements of CSR policies and principles of the former. In the LDC rural context, it is important that local suppliers and subcontractors do not get punished for their lack of ability to meet those standards, but instead get help to meet them.

Again, according to UNIDO (2002), there is a danger that CSR standards may undermine small firms in developing countries. The focus of these standards tends to reflect the concerns and priorities of consumers, as well as prevailing technologies and best practice in the industrialized countries. This can be a real problem for rural development in LDCs, where one main concern should be how to help local suppliers become more integrated into the global production chain.

Also, bearing in mind the impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis, public and private partnership in campaigns to heighten awareness of HIV/AIDS among company employees is very relevant -- both to corporate and to broader social and economic interests.

## **5. Policy Recommendations**

### ***5.1 Tailor public-private partnerships to the local context.***

When selecting areas for CSR-intervention, it is important to research the local context. Certain areas of intervention may be more relevant to certain contexts.

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<sup>6</sup> It is also important to note some important caveats when trying to replicate this case elsewhere. For example, the project is still early in its intended three-year life span, notwithstanding its progress and learning process to date. HP already built-in a transition strategy to ensure the sustainability of the project without its daily involvement, but how far the project will be sustained still remains to be seen. Moreover, it remains unclear whether this kind of mainstreaming of the project as part of the HP's business strategy is applicable to other parts of the developing world, including particularly LDCs. The strategic value of India, *with its immense market and human resource potential in the very line of business where HP operates*, may have also influenced the company's selection of Indian rural villages for its experiment to align its core business strategy with CSR.

## **5.2 Embrace the governance challenge**

CSR and partnership approaches for LDC rural development must be seen in the complex context of the challenge of governance. Nationally, CSR and partnership efforts need to be rooted in a sound and maturing regulatory environment. Internationally, assistance is needed for building the regulatory capacity of LDC governments, while also continuing to explore how and when to combine voluntary incentives with regulatory approaches to CSR.

## **5.3 Attend to local governance and decentralization**

Local governance capacity is a challenge for special attention. This affects on-the-ground implementation of partnership projects, and is therefore crucial for their success.

Local authorities in LDCs generally suffer from severe financial constraints and have limited capacity for regulation and enforcement. Decentralization may further exacerbate resource and capacity imbalances among partners. Shifting regulative burdens onto local authorities, without actually increasing financial and regulatory support, is a key problem to address. (Bennet, Grohmann and Gentry, 1999)

International partners' efforts also need to focus on local governance and capacity building in rural areas, including in relation to developing local capacities for effective engagement with diverse stakeholders. Necessary governmental measures aim to boost local fiscal and governance capacity, as well as to increase the inclusion, participation and empowerment of the rural poor.

## **5.4 Avoid a myopic focus**

To achieve the rural development targets, it is important to avoid a myopic focus. Partnership deliberations and actions need to be more broad-based and 'contextualised'. LDC rural development is a tough and complex challenge. Action is needed on both the regulatory and voluntary fronts. It is crucial that prioritisation be based on thorough deliberations and broad-based thinking as to the effectiveness of different approaches, and their possible synergies, trade-offs, distractions and other dynamics.

## **5.5 Provide resources, horizon and commitment**

For partnerships to succeed, the various concerns expressed about potential hazards need to be addressed. Leadership, management and sustainability are important. Adequate resources and time horizon are needed, to ensure that work does not end as a one-time intervention. Sustained political commitment, monitoring and scrutiny are required in order to have a sustained impact.

## **5.6 Encourage further innovation**

New and different ways of fostering profits and broad-based development benefits need to be explored and implemented. Current work by the UN Global Compact and by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development are helping to identify successful CSR cases and build learning banks. Efforts to implement and showcase innovative win-win strategies for LDC rural development can also be beneficial. The UN Public-Private Alliance for Rural Development is such an effort.

## 6. Beyond CSR: Issues for Consideration

The following are issues beyond CSR that deserve attention for achieving greater rural development in LDCs:

- There is urgent need to reverse the decline in international and domestic **resources for agriculture and rural development** and refocus policies of major international financial institutions and LDC Governments in this area.
- It is important to have domestic policies and capabilities in LDCs take advantage of opportunities provided by **foreign direct investments of CSR-inspired businesses**, to maximise diffusion of best practices, skills development, and good corporate practices, thereby influencing the impact that such investment can have on the growth process (Morisset and Nagaraja, 2001).
- Developed countries' **trade policy** (especially in agriculture) needs to be supportive. It should not undermine the rural LDCs' effort to trade their way out of poverty.
- It is useful to pursue **regional integration**. Foreign firms may have an interest in investing in local rural development because by raising the general standard of living and alleviating poverty, they will create new consumers for their products. However, this effect depends on the concerned society's local and regional market size being sufficiently large. Accordingly, as emphasized in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), regional integration makes sense.
- It is also important to address **productive capacity and other capacity problems**. Not all of LDC agriculture export problems are attributable to trade or market access limitations. Some also stem from their limited ability to attract investment and their general shortage of productive and competitive capacity. The agencies of the UN system could expand current efforts to build up LDCs' capacities in these areas.

## List of Abbreviations

CSR:	Corporate Social Responsibility
DfID:	Department for International Development (UK)
DRC:	Democratic Republic of Congo
FDI:	Foreign Direct Investment
HP:	Hewlett-Packard
LDC:	Least Developed Country
MDG:	Millennium Development Goal
NEPAD:	New Partnership for Africa's Development
CIME:	Committee on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises (OECD)
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
UN:	United Nations
UNCTAD:	United Nations Conference for Trade and Development
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIDO:	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
WSSD:	World Summit for Sustainable Development

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