

DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE CSR THROUGH ACCEPTABILITY CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is the continuing commitment by business to behave fairly and responsibly and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as local community and society at large. The CSR practices adopted by the corporate houses in India are still in the nascent stage. These practices are mostly evaluated on the basis of the perception of the stakeholders, as well as how they rate the company on a responsibility index. It is this acceptability by the stakeholders that makes the difference. This article tries to examine the effectiveness of CSR through acceptability concept. Companies should ensure that their CSR initiatives are demand based and suit the local needs. Only then can they be acceptable and this acceptability is the real test of CSR success.

I. INTRODUCTION

Enterprises don't exist in a vacuum. They exist in a milieu with which they are in a dynamic interaction. Naturally they cannot wish away the society at large. It is against this backdrop that the role of business in society is being revisited and the triple bottom line concept has emerged. Thus, it is no longer only profit but the triple P of Planet, People and Profit, in the same order that has become the concern of a business enterprise. An enterprise today is accountable for its impact on all relevant stakeholders and this realization has prompted leading corporations to engage in efforts for enhancing social well-being and environmental protection. While such efforts in the earlier times had taken the form of corporate philanthropy, a more proactive approach is being taken today balancing economic efficiency and social and environmental protection. This

concept has taken the form of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

CSR is the continuing commitment by business to behave fairly and responsibly and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as local community and society at large. It is a collection of policies, programs and practices adopted, followed and recognized by a company. CSR is based on certain values including respect for people, communities (in which the company operates) and the environment.

CSR has gained lot of importance among companies in recent times because of its long-term benefits. Companies should be responsible to the society for their activities as they owe to the environment in which they operate. Consequently, environmental protection, transparency among stakeholders,

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education, health, employee welfare activities and compliance with the legal requirements has gained importance for corporate worldwide. However, mere contribution to community building does not make a company socially responsible. A company needs to take a balanced view of the components of corporate social responsibility and implement the strategies in coherence with its vision, mission and values. (Nayak, 2003)

The various dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility are human rights, working conditions, equality and diversity, consumer protection, environment and health impacts, economic development, ethical business practices, lobbying and political influence and business role in conflict zones. In recent times, companies are increasingly adopting socially responsible practices because of their long-term benefits. Some of the benefits can be discussed as under:-

- ▣ Helps in creating and maintaining a high reputation.
- ▣ Secures strong relationship with stakeholders.
- ▣ Creates a better, safer and more stimulating work environment.
- ▣ Improves business management efficiency.
- ▣ Makes access to funding easier.
- ▣ Allows benefiting from fiscal advantages and administrative facilitation.
- ▣ Reduces enterprise risk. (Nayak, 2003)

However, it is not only what the company does that is important. How the people perceive the company, how they rate the company on a responsibility index that matters. It is this acceptability by the people that makes the difference. Thus, this article tries to examine the effectiveness of CSR through acceptability

concept. The article has been divided to five sections. The first section, the introductory one, discusses the various concepts associated with CSR. The second section provides details about relevance of CSR. The third section provides strategies for effective implementation of CSR. The fourth deals with various models of CSR as applied in national as well as international context. The next section discusses about the acceptability concept and its relationship with effective CSR implementation policies. The sixth section briefs about the present scenario in India. This section also provides a conceptual model to be applied in Indian context and the seventh concludes the article.

II. RELEVANCE OF CSR

An organization's performance can be defined by comparing the value that an organization creates by using its productive assets with the value that the owners of the assets expect to obtain. If the value of the asset created is at least as large as the value expected, then it is likely that the owners of productive assets will continue to make these assets available for use by a particular organization. When value created is less than what is expected, owners of assets are likely to be dissatisfied and look for alternatives where the use of their assets can obtain its full value.

The issue of social responsibility of business merits consideration in all phases of strategic management and evokes various responses from academicians and businessmen. At one end the opinion does not favor including social responsibility in business considerations. Under this view which has been propounded by the economist Adam Smith and Milton Friedman, the only responsibility of business is to perform its economic functions efficiently and provide goods and services to the society, earn

maximum profits and leave social functions to other institutions or society such as the government. At the other extreme, there is an opposite view which favors the position that it is imperative for business to be socially responsible. This is based on the argument that business organizations are part of the society and have to serve primarily the interest of the society rather than narrow economic objectives such as profit making. In doing so, they have to allocate resources to solve social problems.

Strategies for effective implementation of CSR today are based upon the Triple Bottom Line Approach. As corporate citizens, the organizations should contribute to the nation's economic, social and ecological capital. Financial performance constitutes the bedrock upon which a larger economic contribution can be sustained. The organizations should thus concentrate on the progress in financial terms in the first instance. Strong financial performance enables a company to contribute in growing measure to the expectation of shareholders for increased income through dividend. Strengthening competitive capability of a company's business enables it to sustain superior performance. It is the strategic intent of a company to blend the multiple competencies residing within its businesses to create new engines of growth in a bid to secure the future (Deveshwar, 2005).

The companies can also invest in rural infrastructure through creation of rural hubs which would benefit them through two-way flow of goods and services. By extending to the rural markets companies gain the leverage of in-house capabilities. Companies are driven by the compelling vision of enlarging their contribution to the society, and should embrace the vast multitudes living in poverty and address

the alarming depletion of finite natural resources to engender the economic growth. Sustainable growth is dependent on the creation of capacity to consume among the rural poor. Conducive land use policies can harness the employment intensity of the agro forestry value chain, while concurrently addressing serious issues relating to biomass depletion, water security, ecological balance and biodiversity. Many countries have demonstrated the utility of linking land use with replenishment, thus creating viable, renewable resource based industry as well as millions of jobs in the rural hinterlands (Deveshwar, 2005).

III. STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF CSR

Strategies for effective implementation of CSR in business are still in its nascent state (Dentchev, 2005). Management of CSR is a challenging task for organizations and has a strategic relevance. Implementation of CSR helps in determining social prosperity of business. Contribution to social prosperity by companies is considered to be morally correct. However, organizations should combine the principles of social responsibility with profit generation in order to ensure their survival.

Implementing CSR strategically means to set intentional choices of organizations with respect to making certain commitments, taking particular decisions, and executing concrete actions (Dentchev, 2005). Approaching CSR theoretically from a strategic perspective helps in integrating the responsibility principles in business models. The strategic approaches to CSR are based on the six phases of the strategic management process (Hitt, Ireland, and Hoskisson, 2003).

i) The perception of CSR in the external environment : Members of the external environment of business include the local communities, industry bodies, government functionaries at various national and international levels, competitors, business partners, customers, NGOs, academicians and opinion makers. The consultation on health, safety and environment issues is taken up in different ways: finding out their position on the issues in existing documents, in official and/or unofficial meetings and soliciting spontaneous comments from them. The purpose of doing so is to understand stakeholder expectations related to various health, safety and environment issues and to decide on the appropriate responses. The company needs to ensure that the opinions from the right people are collected. Taking opinion from a variety of stakeholders is significant and contributes to the company's ability to make decisions for its health, safety and environment issues.

ii) The perceptions of CSR in the internal environment : Companies discuss with their employees the health, safety and environment performance through various means like filling out questionnaires, developing networks and talking about accidents with employees at the operational level. This facilitates learning from experience. However, as employees build expertise in their job and their repeated actions become routine, this develops a resistance to learn new practices on improving health, safety and environment performance of the firm.

iii) Strategic intent and mission on CSR : The objective of strategic intent and mission regarding health, safety and environment is to express the corporate commitment. However, when stakeholders expect such a commitment, they become critical of overstatements or understatements of the company. Further,

current improvements in health, safety and environment often become future norms making stakeholders' expectations more and more demanding over time.

iv) CSR strategy formulation : Companies should develop a rigorous action-plan that articulates the health, safety and environment commitments into specific actions. When these concrete action-plans transform into concrete targets it constitutes the performance that is expected of every production unit of a company.

v) CSR strategy implementation : The two most important factors that characterize the implementation of CSR strategies are resources employed and control of performance. The resources employed consist of external and internal communication on health, safety and environment performance, training and equipment that facilitates the improvement of health, safety and environment related actions. This further helps in developing the right competencies for employees in order to meet health, safety and environment targets.

vi) CSR contribution to strategic competitiveness : Health, safety and environment improvements contribute to increased employee motivation, easier attraction of new employees, and better relationships with groups such as contractors, investors, shareholders, government officials and the local community.

IV. MODELS OF CSR

There are three models of thinking on CSR. Although these models do not provide one right way to conceptualize CSR, they do offer a framework for considerations about public policy and the future of socially responsible business behavior (Redman, 2005).

Model One: The Traditional Conflict

The traditional neoclassical model is based on the assumption that tradeoffs between social and environmental goals and profits are inevitable. As firms only consider private marginal costs while making production decisions, they overproduce products or services, operating at less than the socially optimum market equilibrium when social costs exceed firms' private costs. These decisions create negative externalities and require government policies or other market-correcting interventions to restore the socially optimal equilibrium (Redman, 2005).

In the above frame the industry and the environment are thought to be at loggerheads as conventional methods of extraction, manufacture, and disposal are destructive to the natural worlds. For staunch environmentalists business is bad and industry inevitably destructive. Industrialists on the other hand view environmentalism as a hurdle to production and growth. In this light the two systems cannot be compatible (Mc Donough and Braungart, 2002).

When business actions create social and environmental problems, traditional market correction policies are called for. Therefore, to encourage socially responsible behavior, the government should give incentives like tax breaks or rebates to companies that meet certain requirements. Giving out awards or recognition for good behavior, and the development of social or eco-labels that companies can obtain by meeting relevant standards is also helpful. Facilitating CSR can take many forms from minimum wage laws to command-and-control strategies to reduce pollution (Redman, 2005). Nevertheless, interventions are necessary to restore socio-economic and ecological

balance, if profits vs. societal goals is the approach.

Model Two: Corporate Social Responsibility brings in the Cash

Though the traditional view of conflict between industrial and social goals still holds, many companies are rewriting the relationship between financial, social and environmental performance. Executives from these companies view environmental integrity and healthy communities as means to achieve greater profits. Model two represents the ideology that majority of companies think in terms of socially responsible investment (SRI) portfolios (Redman, 2005).

These companies prefer to be socially responsible because they believe that it leads to increased sales, greater innovation, reduced production inefficiencies, less future risks, and more access to capital. There are indicators to suggest that 21st century businesses view social and environmental excellence as strategic business tools. Between 1995 and 2003, assets put into social investments grew 40 percent faster than all professionally managed investment assets in the United States (Social Investment Forum, 2003). In response, companies are developing CSR departments, rewriting their mission statements to include ethical goals, and developing codes of conduct that extend to employees and contractors worldwide (Center for Corporate Citizenship, 2003).

Model two businesses believe that reputation helps in recruitment and retention of quality employees. Studies have found that job satisfaction correlates with greater commitment to a company and greater business success (Redman, 2005).

Early strategic investments in CSR can improve product and service quality,

defray future lawsuits, and prevent or at least mitigate the effects of negative media coverage. Sourcing guidelines and ethical codes help companies avoid the future costs of shoddy workmanship, unreliable business relationships, financial mismanagement, and disruptions of operations by improving the quality of products and services (Redman, 2005).

Model Three: Multiple Firm Goals, All Created Equal

Even if model two companies predominate among SRI portfolios, it is the model three businesses that we should really strive to encourage (Teiwes, 2005). This model explains the ideology of firms that have made commitments to environmental and social goals without linking corporate citizenship with tangible financial gains. The owners/managers believe that social and environmental achievements are worthy of attainment and should be pursued as vigorously as profits (Redman, 2005).

Even though it is uncommon in a society that measures success by GDP and other material criteria, there are companies that view their business in terms of its social and environmental contributions. Generally privately run by social entrepreneurs, philanthropists or environmentalists, these companies often have CEO's or owners with deep personal convictions. Their companies do make profits but financial goals do not score over social or environmental considerations (Redman, 2005).

This ideology is based on the idea that business, like people, has moral obligations and responsibilities that extend beyond the financial world. Model-three thinking requires more than teaching business owners and managers how to be responsible corporate citizens. The average citizens' understanding about value

creation needs to be changed and success should include social and environmental contributions (Redman, 2005).

V.ACCEPTABILITY CONCEPT

The acceptability of operations is multidimensional and multilevel social concept. The degree of social participation influences the extent of the concept of acceptability. The social responsibilities performed by the corporate are considered effective only if they are readily accepted by the society. The main element in the concept of acceptability is the implementation of company policies and strategies at the local level and this is perceived to be the most important (Mikkila, 2005).

The key elements of acceptability at the local level are financial, environmental and socioeconomic ones, while the concept at the global level emphasized the environmental responsibility of multinational companies. The concept of acceptability strengthened the preconception of variations in corporate social performance with place and time. The multi-level acceptability demonstrates that a global business enterprise operates in local, national and global environments and opinions on the acceptability of its operations in one place can change depending on the level at which it is examined. There are eleven dimensions which should be taken into consideration when assessing the acceptability of operations of a business enterprise and they include technical, financial, economic, natural resource, environmental, social, societal, cultural, organizational, institutional and ethical issues (Mikkila, 2005).

The concept of global acceptability emerges in cases where there are globalizing companies in a country with a

relatively high level of social participation, while the local element in the concept of acceptability is emphasized in cases where a production unit operates mainly in a national environment, whether owned by a national or a multinational company.

Corporate social performance through the acceptability of operations is clearly a value-bound concept among the stakeholders. The majority of the stakeholders are of the opinion that acceptable operations are ones that follow national and international standards, regulations and legislation, and that they do not set any higher norms for the company than for other citizens. This can be regarded as minimum level for acceptable performance on the part of a company (Mikkila, 2005).

VI. PRESENT SCENARIO

Many organizations in India have contributed towards the society since the post independence period. Some have demonstrated exemplary sense of social responsibility as discussed below.

Tata Group : J R D Tata strongly believed in the concept of CSR. The company's philanthropic activities can be dated as early as 1892, when Jamshedji Tata established the J N Tata Endowment Scheme to provide higher education for deserving Indians. To institutionalize social responsibility, the group amended its Articles of Association according to which the group shall perform its social and moral responsibilities to the consumers, employees, shareholders, society and the local community.

The Tatas have spent Rs. 1.5 billion on social services-the highest by any corporate house in the country during 2001-02. They laid stress upon rural development, which included community health, basic education and vocational training. It has spent on basic

infrastructure and disbursed money through various charitable trusts and relief and reconstruction societies. Tata covers 700 villages in and around Tata Steel's diverse business operations in the states of Jharkhand and Orissa (Nayak, 2000).

Infosys : Infosys conducts its business by following a socially responsible and sustainable path. Narayana Murthy believes that he should give more to the society than what it has given him. They believe that corporations must show fairness in dealing with employees to retain them, transparent disclosures should be ensured by corporations to attract global capital, customer satisfaction should be ensured to win confidence and loyalty, fair dealings in the supply chains should be ensured and they should pay all taxes to be ethical to the government. Infosys has formed The Infosys Foundation which focuses on health care, primary education, social rehabilitation and rural upliftment, art and culture. It has been influencing corporate India to discharge their social responsibilities and at the same time focus on profit generation. According to a recent report, Infosys spends about Rs. 50 million social activities (Nayak, 2000).

A V Birla Group : The A V Birla group has contributed to the poor and marginalized people in and around its plants across India. The Aditya Birla Center for Community Initiatives and Rural Development looks after the welfare driven activities of the Group. Some of the welfare activities of the group are innovative projects which involve the development of rural youth and generating employment for them; education and training and health care projects; helping the disable people; social causes like widow remarriages; dowry less marriages and women empowerment programs. Scholarship offers are also given to students from IITs, IIMs, and BITS (Pilani)

by the A V Birla group for nurturing the leaders of tomorrow. Only the best are selected for the coveted award and are called 'The Aditya Birla scholars'.

ITC : ITCs economic impact has been pervasive. The company is driven by the compelling vision of enlarging its contribution to the society. It seeks to achieve this value objective by not only driving each of its businesses towards international competitiveness, but also by consciously contributing to the competitiveness of the entire value chain. The company promotes wood-based industry that carries the potential to make a vital contribution towards the creation of rural livelihoods and would also restore ecological balance. The company's presence in the pulp based value chain provides the basis for a significantly enlarged contribution by developing wastelands through the promotion of agro forestry.

The company is also engaged in implementing various other social development initiatives to make a meaningful contribution in the economic vicinity of its operating locations. It focuses on creating alternative employment for surplus labour and decrease pressure on arable land by promoting non-farm incomes. ITCs Women Economic Empowerment programs seeks to sustainable livelihood opportunities for women (Nayak, 2000).

But it must be mentioned that comprehensive empirical work on CSR with the help of the acceptability concept has not been undertaken in India and the idea is still in nascent stage. Though CSR efforts by business, however, are being carried out more seriously than earlier there is still a long way to go.

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL TO BE APPLIED IN INDIAN CONTEXT

Though being practiced for quite sometime, CSR in India has not proved to be very successful. The roots for this can be traced perhaps to our culture where we often times lay more emphasis on the rituals rather than results. CSR in India began as a welfare measure in the companies but gradually the society too was added to the list of beneficiaries with globalization catching on. The concept of triple bottom line started being advocated and companies began putting up a broad framework of CSR in place. But the desired results are still not there. CSR for practical purposes remains a supply driven rather than a need-based activity and hence the concept of acceptability of the stakeholders is alien to Indian CSR.

In order to make CSR effective in India, emphasis has to be given on acceptability of CSR practices among the stakeholders and due care must be exercised to find out how CSR efforts are perceived. The reasons why CSR has not been effective may be summarized as below:

- i) Socio-cultural dimensions – Organizations treat CSR as a welfare or charitable or philanthropic activity. They are not treating CSR as a responsibility or duty. Further, they do it to take advantages from the government and generate goodwill. On the other hand, the society is apprehensive of industries and there is lack of mutual trust. Therefore industries are perceived as vehicles of profit making rather than agencies of growth and development. Further, the political parties try to exploit this lack of trust by playing one against the other. It is somewhat similar to the fate of trade union movement. So the situation

does not change. The apprehensions continue. However, of late industries and society are coming close and the trust is growing. But it will still take time to get roots in the Indian society. Acceptability study should find out the perception of the society about CSR initiatives of the industries.

- ii) Role of government – CSR has still not been made mandatory by the government. Therefore government and industry should come together for implementing CSR systematically and the implementation should be reported to the government.
- iii) Competitive advantage – In this competitive era, the firms do not compete against each other in terms of discharging its CSR initiatives effectively. The performing of their CSR duties does not have a competitive advantage over other firms. Acknowledgement of the CSR activities by the society and the government would develop a sense of responsibility among the organizations.

The following framework is being suggested for effective implementation of CSR strategies:

- i) Identifying social needs – In the first instance, organizations should identify the needs of the society. The kind of CSR activities required for the growth of the organization and its stakeholders should be identified.
- ii) Planning CSR activities – How CSR activities would be implemented should be planned. For this the organizations need to conduct a research on the external business environment. This should include study of the CSR activities implemented by its competitors. Organizations should also study the acceptability of those activities by the society. The following

points should be kept in mind:

- Need of the society;
 - Readiness of the organization towards contributing to those needs;
 - Whether the initiatives taken by the government would be acceptable to the society.
- iii) Preparing CSR matrix – The feedback from the research conducted on the external environment would help organizations prepare a CSR matrix. They should take into consideration the social and environmental issues. The proposed CSR matrix would include the CSR activities to be implemented by the organization. Therefore, it should comply with all the legal rules and regulations. The proposed activities should also be presented to the stakeholders concerned. Stakeholders' views should be taken into consideration and changes should be made accordingly.
 - iv) Implementation of CSR activities – Implementation of CSR activities is a continuous process. There is no common method or step for implementation of these activities. This may differ from organization to organization and would be the discretion of the management.
 - v) The extent of acceptability of CSR operations should be measured. This may be done by taking feedback from the stakeholders concerned. Various measurement devices have already been adopted by various organizations for measuring the social performance, but no single method could be identified as the most effective one. Hence, the organizations should go for customized measurement technique, specific to their type of operations, while taking the cognizance of the following.

Acceptability of Operations

For developing strategies for the CSR operations to be acceptable by the society, the following should be kept in mind by the organizations:

- i) The firm's corporate culture should be consistent with CSR values (Hohnen, 2007).
- ii) There should be transparency in the operations of the organizations.
- iii) The firm's approach should be communicated to the business partners, suppliers, communities, governments, the general public and others.
- iv) Collection of feedback from the stakeholders.
- v) Measurement of the actual contribution and the expectation of the stakeholders.
- vi) Feedback to be incorporated in next year's strategy development.

VII. CONCLUSION

Business cannot grow when a large section of the population is deprived of the basic amenities such as water, housing, health care and education. India is growing country and it is believed that this growth provides companies with a business opportunity as well as with a social opportunity. Companies can help remove the weaknesses that exist in the society and human development infrastructure. We can take a cue from what Obama, President, US, said recently at G20 meeting in London that if America neglected or abandoned poor countries, "not only are we depriving ourselves of potential opportunities for markets and economic growth, but ultimately that despair may turn to violence that turns on us." (The Telegraph, 2009). The same applies to business and industry also.

Inclusive growth is the mantra, be it a nation or a corporate.

The CSR practices in India are still in the nascent stage. For the success of CSR efforts by any business, companies should engage employees with CSR activities. Stakeholders should be communicated about the CSR activities and their participation in these activities would help in the success of these programmes. Further companies should ensure that their CSR initiatives are demand based and suit the local needs. Only then can they be acceptable and this acceptability is the real test of CSR success.

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