

Partnership building as an approach to addressing corporate social responsibility in the agriculture sector in Malawi.

Malawi is one of the least developed countries in the world with 54 percent of the population living below the poverty line despite its relative political stability. Despite Agriculture being so significant in Malawi accounting for 38 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), contributing 87 percent of labor force and 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings, the sector is still particularly weak. Inadequate farm infrastructure, poor provision of extension services and a weak skills base have all restricted smallholder farmers' ability to produce commercially viable quantities and quality of marketable outputs. As a result, Malawi is still what may be termed basic farming which is primarily subsistence in nature.

The agriculture sector however can improve Malawi's trade and economic growth through stakeholder partnerships and these stakeholders can manage the country's supply and value chains so as to make progress towards sustainable livelihoods across the country. This entails the agriculture sector taking a leading role in managing the countries natural resources, cross-cutting issues as well as capacity building of the whole sector for the benefit of small scale farmers.

Traditionally, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) meant responding to individual community needs in the location where the company is operating rather than focusing on strategic interventions to benefit the country at large. Businesses have tried to respond to specific issues like HIV and AIDS, child labour, provision of health care and food security in times of need. Recently, the agriculture sector has begun view CSR as a tool to build a sustainable and viable economic base for the country by initiating more comprehensive CSR programmes. This is to reduce social and environmental risk as well as to remove the expectations local habitants has for businesses operating in their area. There are a lot of challenges in implementing CSR such as implementation cost. To deal with the challenges, companies and non-governmental organizations have partnered together. These partnerships in the agriculture sector have also helped in the development of CSR itself as companies now focus on dealing with broader national strategies rather than specific issues.

There are mainly three types of partnerships in implementing CSR in Malawi. Firstly, the partnership often develops when an individual company is seeking to address an issue affecting them. The company may seek partnership with a specific NGO or organization which has experience in addressing that problem. Normally the partnership is for a limited or fixed term and usually programmes are implemented in their geographical area of operation. For this type of partnership to be effective there is need for good communication between

partners at each level of CSR implementation. A constructive dialogue is necessary to understand each other's expectations and needs, which helps the partners to gain mutual knowledge and to create a clear and common vision of the required work. The Company-and issue-specific partnership cannot be successful if trust has been undermined.

Secondly, Collective, Issue-specific partnership is a partnership that develops when a group of companies and NGOs come together to deal with problems that affect each one of them and a solution requires a collective approach. This is a situation where no single organization, however innovative or powerful, could not deal with the social problem alone. This type of partnership normally involves several private sector companies with one company managing service delivery but with several service providers and the companies engage in CSR programmes that deals with an issue which is relevant to all of them rather than an individual company. Unlike most partnerships, collective-issue specific approach involve dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants. The partnership sometimes allows the companies to outsource the services needed to achieve the problem at hand. This is the most effective type of partnership as it involves a core group of companies and NGOs who abandons their individual agendas in favor of a collective approach to improve the agriculture sector. This approach doesn't happen often, not because it is impossible, but because it is so rarely attempted. Companies and NGOs overlook the potential for collective action because they are used to focusing on independent action as the primary vehicle for social change. This type of partnership therefore needs proper management as it involves several companies.

Finally, Collective, Sustainability- Focused partnership is a partnership that is in its infancy stage in Malawi. This one addresses the underlying framework for doing business itself and promotes competitive advantage and innovation in companies' core business strategies. Through this type of partnership, companies implement CSR activities that develop the Agriculture sector at the same time improving sustainable livelihoods in the country. This approach involves companies adopting a collective approach for them to understand their roles in their society, maximizing their profits through lessons learnt in implementing CSR activities and most importantly bringing about the sustainable agribusiness development in Malawi.

In Malawi, partnership types are shifting from being philanthropic in nature where companies were only focusing on their immediate society to a sector-wide approach for increased benefits of both the organizations

and the society at large. All these partnerships however require proper facilitation for CSR activities to be effective.