THE BUSINESS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Human Rights, Partnerships, Alternative Business Models

EDITORS

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PRETORIA
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The United Nations (UN) Global Compact is the world’s largest corporate citizenship initiative. It brings companies together with UN agencies, labour and civil society to support universal environmental and social principles. The Global Compact’s ten principles (described in more detail in the first chapter of this book) are meant to trigger and guide responsible business behaviour at the level of the individual company, as well as collective action between companies. In this way, the private sector – in partnership with other social actors – works towards a more sustainable and inclusive global economy.

In 2005, Africa’s development became more prominent on the international agenda through initiatives such as the Commission for Africa. The Global Compact used this momentum to invite its participants to put Africa high on their corporate citizenship agenda and to engage in learning, dialogue and partnerships that are relevant to the African continent.

In November 2006, representatives of business, civil society, UN organisations and government gathered for the Global Compact 4th International Learning Forum Meeting in Ghana. The objectives of the meeting were to share lessons learned and explore opportunities for cooperation on major topics related to corporate citizenship in Africa: business and human rights, business in zones of conflict, business and community engagement, collective action against corruption, and partnerships for development.

Facilitation of learning at the meeting was supported by a range of specially prepared case studies of relevant managerial experiences. These case studies and related discussions at the Ghana conference have contributed significantly to this book. To make the book even more relevant to the African context, additional case studies of innovative business models that relate to ‘bottom-of-the-pyramid’ strategies have been included.

I wish to thank Ralph Hamann and his colleagues for their excellent editorial work and introductory chapters, the case study authors for their dedication and insight, and the company managers for committing themselves to long interviews and scrutiny so that their experiences could be shared. A personal ‘thank you’ goes to Girum Bahri, who has been a pillar of support throughout the entire process. Last but not least, I wish to thank the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ – the German development agency) for their generous financial support.

It is my hope that this publication will help managers around the world and especially in Africa to shape their decision-making processes towards responsible and sustainable business engagement.
FOREWORD

BY

DERICK DE JONGH

This book is a vital contribution to the corporate citizenship debate in Africa and beyond. It will contribute to a much needed deepening of academic integrity in the field of corporate citizenship, linked to practical relevance for decision-makers in business and other organisations. Our vision at the Centre for Corporate Citizenship at the University of South Africa is ‘Business in Service of Humanity’. We believe that the only way to achieve this ‘end game’ is to build individual and institutional capacity for sustainable business and social cohesion.

The reason why this book is so important is indicated in its title. The ‘business of sustainable development’ is complex and challenging. The book contextualises the role of business in development from an African perspective and offers clarity through alternative views and real-life examples. The book’s strength therefore lies in its practical demonstration through case studies combined with conceptual reasoning. It highlights and celebrates the tension and positive energy between business objectives and sustainable development objectives through critical reflection and alternative paradigms. Also noteworthy is the healthy interplay between the concepts in Part 1 and the case studies in Part 2 of the book. The book will challenge you with new concepts and practical innovation, whether you are a student, an academic or a business person.

Being good corporate citizens is not an abstract issue. It requires constant, critical reflection on the purpose of business. The Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative – hosted by the UN Global Compact in conjunction with the European Foundation for Management Development – advocates a revised definition of the purpose of business, and it seeks to respond to the question, How do we create a new generation of globally responsible leaders? This book is part of the response to this question and it will play an important role in advancing globally responsible leadership.

With great appreciation,

DERICK DE JONGH

Centre for Corporate Citizenship
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Pretoria, November 2007
Prologue:
Purpose and Scope of This Book

Never before in human history has a single generation witnessed such explosive change. It seems self-evident, therefore, that the policies we adopt, the decisions we make, and the strategies we pursue over the next decade or two will determine the future of our species and the trajectory of the planet for the foreseeable future. That is an awesome responsibility, to say the least. It is also a huge opportunity.

This book is about enhancing the contribution of business to sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa, with an emphasis on both challenges and opportunities. Sub-Saharan Africa is confronted with many of the world’s most pressing problems. Over 40% of the population continue to live in extreme poverty. It is the only region in the world where the proportion of extremely poor people increased during the final decades of the previous century. (The proportion has been decreasing more recently.) The overarching imperative to support Africa’s poor in their quest for better livelihoods, human rights and environmental integrity – in short, sustainable development – is a huge challenge, and the business community, ranging from small companies to multinational corporations, has an important role to play. The purpose of this book is to contribute to a better understanding of this role and its implications for decision-makers in business, as well as, to some extent, government and civil society.

The term sustainable development is increasingly ubiquitous, so much so that some people feel it is becoming devoid of any real meaning. However, it is still highly relevant in that it connotes the need for significant, rapid change at various levels – also in business organisations – if we are to meet ‘the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. Its key premise is that all economic activity is contingent and dependent on the social and natural systems in which it takes place. Economic activity that undermines the integrity and resilience of communities and ecosystems is not only creating increased hardship for those already struggling with ill-health and poverty, but it is also sowing the seeds of its own destruction. Two key requirements of sustainable development are innovation and fairness – they are necessary because they allow society to continuously create and better share prosperity within the carrying capacity of the natural environment. The creation and distribution of wealth, of course, is fundamentally linked to the role of business in society.

Although the literature on the relationship between business and society has a long history, this theme is becoming much more prominent and vital. It is also particularly pertinent in Africa, where a key sustainable development challenge is increasing economic prosperity. A growing, thriving private sector, increased entrepreneurship and an enabling business environment are widely accepted as important objectives in their own right. However, economic development per se should not be our only goal. Companies that contribute unimpeded to human rights abuses, environmental pollution or anti-competitive practices will take Africa backwards. The role of business organisations, ranging from small, survivalist enterprises to
multinational corporations, is thus at the heart of the moral and economic imperative that is sustainable development in Africa.

The expectation that companies can indeed make proactive contributions to sustainable development is linked to a range of terms – we will be using corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and others where appropriate. In many quarters, CSR is still associated with outdated notions of philanthropy, but we use these terms much more broadly with an emphasis on core business practices. Here we are not concerned so much with how companies spend a proportion of their profits for worthy causes, but rather with how they make those profits (or perhaps losses) in the first place. Definitions will be considered in more detail in Chapter 1 and in any case terminology should not hold us up unduly. The key point is that corporate citizenship is fundamentally about core business strategy and its implementation, and it involves increasingly complex responsibilities and possible dilemmas for business decision-makers, as well as new opportunities. This strategic approach is vital because it enhances the business case for contributing to sustainable development and it increases the reach and effectiveness of such efforts. As argued by prominent management scholars Michael Porter and Mark Kramer,

> The fact is, the prevailing approaches to CSR are so fragmented and so disconnected from business and strategy as to obscure many of the greatest opportunities for companies to benefit society. If, instead, corporations were to analyze their prospects for social responsibility using the same frameworks that guide their core business choices, they would discover that CSR can be much more than a cost, a constraint, or a charitable deed – it can be a source of opportunity, innovation, and competitive advantage.  

Hence, much depends on how managers and facilitators approach these issues. Innovative, proactive approaches can turn responsibilities and challenges into opportunities. Creative thinking, innovation and partnerships can give rise to new business models that meet developmental needs, while generating consistent financial returns.

Furthermore, we consider corporate citizenship not only from an organisational perspective focused on companies themselves, but also, where appropriate, from a broader analytical perspective that considers the role of supply chains, government policies, civil society groups and other features of what business scholars like Stuart Hart call the ‘ecology of commerce’. Facilitating seamless transitions between these various levels of analysis is an important skill not only for researchers – management scholars, in particular, are often criticised for their focus on the business firm only – but also one that deserves fostering among business practitioners, particularly in corporate citizenship matters.

The book’s target audience is broad. It is aimed at managers and students (especially those in business organisations or in business-related courses), as well as those with scholarly interests in related fields, such as management, law or development studies. Hence we have tried to balance the needs and interests of these different types of readers, on the premise that a combination of practical and theoretical relevance is important for business managers and others who face complex challenges and need to know how to respond to them better. Similarly, we have backed up the theoretical chapters (Part 1) with case studies that give an African contextual flavour to these debates (Part 2).
This book is, however, not primarily a ‘how to’ guide to corporate citizenship management, although some managerial implications are considered where appropriate.\(^6\) It does not take for granted the role of profit maximisation as a guiding vision for business or the need for unfeathered free markets – two key notions commonly associated with traditional MBA programmes that have been cogently criticised by eminent management scholars such as Harry Mintzberg and Sumantra Goshal.\(^7\) As noted by Nobel laureate, Joseph Stiglitz:

> Today, there is a mismatch between social and private returns. Unless they are closely aligned, the market system cannot work well.\(^8\)

Where appropriate, the book introduces perspectives that are critical of the role of business and especially of multinational corporations and their claims of being good citizens when in fact they have much to answer for. Such perspectives are an important aspect of the corporate citizenship debate and they also contribute to the learning process within business organisations. Though this book argues that business decision-makers can make important contributions to sustainable development, I want to stress at the outset that such contributions can only be effective in the long term as part of a suite of efforts by a broader range of role-players, including civil society and governments. Much depends on our ability to shape the public sector context in which companies operate, from local to global levels.\(^9\)

There is a recurring emphasis in this book on learning. For business, government and civil society, learning is vital. To accept this is to acknowledge that we do not have all the answers and that not only ‘best practice’ examples provide learning opportunities. Indeed, perhaps the most telling lessons come from individuals or companies confronted with difficult situations or dilemmas, where it is hard to know how to ‘do the right thing’. Once decisions are made and actions taken, we have an opportunity to learn with the benefit of hindsight. Making good use of such opportunities is one of the primary purposes of the case studies in Part 2 of this book.

Within the overarching topic of corporate citizenship and the role of business in Africa’s development, the book has three guiding themes. Each theme has a dedicated introductory chapter in Part 1 and is illustrated by five (and in one instance six) case studies in Part 2.

The first theme is human rights. We ask the question: How can business decision-makers best respond to human rights dilemmas in the often challenging African business environment? There are often no easy answers to the vexing questions facing managers who want to act ethically and with integrity.\(^10\) For a start, where do we draw the line when it comes to deciding what a company is responsible for? Do we include the activities of its business partners or even the host government? State organisations are normally expected to ensure that the interests of poor and vulnerable people are safeguarded and to mediate between different rights and interests, but in many parts of Africa these organisations are constrained or ineffective. In such circumstances, the sole pursuit of profits for the company can have a very detrimental impact on people and the environment – as well as on the long-term prospects of the company. Furthermore, companies may become obliged to act as mediators and guarantors of the public interest – a role for which most managers are ill-equipped.

Companies are finding themselves in increasingly complex webs of cause-and-effect relationships and interactions between diverse role-players. Business decision-makers can no longer afford to focus solely on their business models or their immediate partners in the value chain, because too many other factors and players may have a significant impact on the busi-

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ness process and the way it affects society. The complexity and unpredictability of the business environment is particularly manifest in many African countries, because of the emerging nature of their economies. Institutional frameworks that provide legal certainties and ensure trust between anonymous parties – crucial conditions for economic growth ¹¹ – are in many instances still developing, even in relatively prosperous South Africa (as discussed in a number of cases in this book). In the worst cases, violent conflict is prevalent or looming, and the implications of this are illustrated incisively in the two case studies set in the eastern DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo). In others, countries and communities are struggling to recover after years of war. Doing business in such circumstances is often difficult and dangerous, which makes sticking to one’s principles more complex, as well as urgent. Of course, difficult business contexts are found elsewhere, too, so in Part 2 of the book we have included a case study from Brazil to illustrate the significant challenges linked to land ownership, and how they have been responded to in an innovative manner by a pulp and paper company.

The second theme is the role of partnerships and collaboration between business, government and civil society in achieving sustainable development objectives. Partnership, both its rhetoric and its practice, has become increasingly prominent in the debates about corporate citizenship and sustainable development in general. The guiding principle is ‘collaborative advantage’, or the expectation that business, government and civil society organisations can achieve their objectives more effectively through strategic alliances in which each party contributes its unique strengths and resources. Arguably many of the challenges facing companies in Africa and elsewhere, such as the burgeoning informal settlements, or crime and corruption, often require careful, strategic collaboration, because they are too large and complex for any one organisation to deal with by itself. But government, business and civil society often have little experience of working together, so such collaboration initiatives have their own array of difficulties.

Furthermore, like corporate citizenship, the notion of partnership is controversial. Critics highlight risks such as the possible undue influence of business on public sector decision-making and the erosion of representative democracy. Such concerns need to be considered carefully, so that the effectiveness and accountability of collaborative initiatives can be enhanced and their broader role in achieving sustainable development objectives assessed. However, partnerships come in many varieties, and the different types are likely to involve different approaches to implementation and evaluation. Chapter 3 provides a typology of initiatives, based on their objectives and levels of institutionalisation, and the corresponding case studies in Part 2 illustrate not only the diversity of partnerships, but also the crucial and complex role local history and context play in motivating and circumscribing these partnerships and determining how feasible and effective they will be.

The third theme is the way alternative business models can be used to help meet sustainable development objectives. In many ways this is an entirely different approach that goes well beyond the mainstream views of corporate citizenship. Rather than integrating social and environmental objectives into existing business models, this approach takes the achievement of these objectives as a point of departure. What is innovative about such initiatives is the way the achievement of social objectives is often premised upon an entrepreneurial business model that provides financial returns at the same time and thus ensures the enterprise’s long-term, independent financial viability.

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Related notions such as social entrepreneurship are linked to a broader emphasis on identifying and supporting market-based, entrepreneurial solutions to such problems as poverty, ill-health and environmental degradation. Here we see dedicated programmes by international development agencies, and business leaders and educators showing increasing interest in the notion of ‘the fortune at the base of the pyramid’, a concept popularised by Prahalad and Hart. Chapter 4 is devoted to this concept, noting some of the tensions between developmental objectives and the continuing pressures for short-term financial returns. These tensions are well illustrated in the case study of one of Hewlett Packard’s initiatives in this field.

Perhaps the most exciting innovations linking social and business objectives are those we see coming from smaller companies that can integrate social objectives decisively into their organisational purpose and strategy, and can then also respond flexibly to the opportunities identified by their leaders. The case studies of Honey Care and E+Co illustrate this potential, as well as some of the challenges it entails. But we also see some larger corporations demonstrating this kind of courageous entrepreneurship that seeks to link profits to social well-being, as illustrated in the case study of Aspen Pharmacare’s supply of low-cost generic medicines to the South African population.

The three overarching themes were chosen on the basis of their particular relevance in the African context, although of course they are also apposite in other regions. The first two themes, human rights and partnership, were especially prominent during the UN Global Compact International Learning Forum Meeting that was held in Ghana in November 2006, which provided many of the case studies and some of the inspiration for this book. The third theme, alternative business models, was added in response to an increasing interest in such initiatives and their potential for sustainable development in Africa. Crucially, the three themes are closely interrelated. For instance, many companies facing human rights challenges, or social entrepreneurs with an innovative business model, have found that collaborating with other sectors is an effective and efficient strategy. There is therefore a good deal of thematic overlap among the case studies in Part 2.

This book’s focus on these particular themes does not of course mean that other aspects of corporate citizenship are less important. The themes of labour rights and environmental management, for instance, are also vital and they present business managers with many dilemmas, in Africa and elsewhere. The various aspects of corporate citizenship are interlinked and interdependent in diverse ways. For instance, many environmental concerns are also human rights concerns, given the devastating effects that pollution or land degradation can have on poor people’s livelihoods. These links between the environment, human rights, and sustainable development are made particularly explicit in some of the case studies, such as the VidaGas effort to provide Liquid Petroleum Gas to clinics and households in northern Mozambique.

Many of the case studies are drawn from the UN Global Compact meeting in Ghana, mentioned above. Most of these were written by independent case authors in collaboration with the relevant representatives of the companies or initiatives concerned. The rest have more eclectic origins. They include cases from postgraduate research projects (Rustenburg mining and HP i-Community), cases that were part of a UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) study on enterprise initiatives targeting the base of the pyramid (VidaGas and Aspen Pharmacare), and cases recently published for the Ivey School of Business (Honey Care Africa and E+Co). The case studies are thus not uniform in terms of style or analysis. Some are
predominantly descriptive, others include more theoretical discussion. The case studies also vary in the degree to which they are critical of corporate practices and this variance is one of the important tensions underlying the concept and material of this book. The case studies are united, however, by the overall aim of providing ample material for reflection by the reader or for discussion in a group or class – the editors have therefore added a few questions for reflection or discussion at the end of each case study.14

Finally, I would like to thank:

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RALPH HAMANN
Cape Town, May 2008

Notes


2 Extreme poverty is the most severe form of poverty, in which people cannot meet basic needs such as food, shelter or health care. It was defined by the World Bank and others as the percentage of people living on less than about US$1 a day, measured in terms of 1993 purchasing power parity. But in 2008 this threshold was moved by World Bank researchers to US$1.25 (relative to 2005 purchasing power in the US), with the result that the number and proportion of people considered to be extremely poor increased significantly (from less than 1 billion to 1.4bn worldwide). For an overview of poverty trends worldwide, see annual publications by the United Nations on progress on the Millennium Development Goals, which are available via http://www.un.org (e.g., United Nations, The Millennium Development Goals Report 2007 (New York: United Nations, 2007)), similar regular reports by the World Bank (available via http://www.worldbank.org), and J. Sachs, The End of Poverty: How we can Make it Happen in our Lifetime (London: Penguin, 2005). Note that though this book’s title and some of its sections refer to Africa, we are primarily concerned with sub-Saharan Africa.


6 There are a number of such guide-books, some of which are introduced briefly in Part 1 of this book. In particular, see C. Fussler, A. Cramer, and S. van der Vegt, *Raising the Bar: Creating Value with the United Nations Global Compact* (Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing, 2004).


10 See also W. Visser, M. McIntosh and C. Middleton, eds, *Corporate Citizenship in Africa: Lessons from the Past; Paths to the Future* (Sheffield: Greenleaf, 2006).


13 Also note the direct links between human rights and the environment in international agreements and national legislation (see, for instance, section 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or article 24 of the South African Constitution, which guarantees the right to an environment that is not harmful to health or well-being).

14 Note that due to the case studies’ eclectic origin and diverse styles we do not lay claim to an overarching sampling strategy that would facilitate more rigorous case comparison (see K. Eisenhardt, ‘Building Theory from Case Study Research’, *Academy of Management Review*, 14, 4 (1989): 532–50). In our introductory chapters in Part 1, we draw on other research that is based on rigorous methodology, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches, but when we refer to the case studies in Part 2 it is primarily for the purpose of illustration or exploration.
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