



Embedding Sustainability In CSR For Long-Term Impact

By Anthony Taiti

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved into an expectation rather than a mere initiative that an organisation can pick up whenever it pleases. Society has placed a demand on organizations to play an active role in solving social and environmental challenges. Following increased scrutiny, organizations have stepped up significantly, but there's a problem: a great deal of CSR practices is transactional and short-term. Instead of investing in long-term, systemic solutions, many organizations fund a one-off initiative, sponsor an event, or donate stuff, and everyone appears to be happy. They take photos, publish a press release, and then move on swiftly. However, weeks or months later, the communities involved are often left with little or no lasting change. This is because the projects collapse under their own weight or fade into irrelevance. How unfortunate!

When it comes to CSR, good intentions are not enough. We have witnessed countless well-meaning projects around the world launched with energy, promise, and passion, only to fizzle out within a shorter period than expected. The reason? Deficient or missing sustainability plan.

A sustainability plan is the backbone of all CSR efforts. It addresses critical aspects that pave way for long-term success, steering clear of the notion that CSR is just a nice-to-have policy or strategy. These include how the projects will continue after the initial funding ends, how the community will be empowered to take ownership, and what lasting value the projects will create for both the community and the organization. Without these aspects in place, CSR devolves into a series of disconnected gestures, rather than serving as a catalyst for meaningful impact.

Nike has made some significant strides in its global CSR and sustainability strategy, now emphasizing long-term partnerships,

measurable impact, and stakeholder inclusion. However, it provides a classic case study of the detrimental effects of not having a sustainability plan for CSR initiatives. In the early 2000s, the company sponsored various school construction and youth education programs in factory-hosting countries in Central America like Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. They refurbished classrooms, provided short-term scholarships, and ran youth empowerment programs in communities hosting or adjacent to their manufacturing facilities. Nike embarked on these CSR projects in response to the overwhelming global scrutiny they faced for their labour practices in the region. They aimed to demonstrate that they were a responsible corporate citizen by providing visible support to surrounding communities.

However, as time passed, several challenges arose, not because these programs were poorly executed, but because they were not designed with sustainability in mind. They were mostly intended for optics, with a focus on short-term brand objectives instead of being in sync with the needs of the community. Once the funding ended or the PR objectives were met, the projects often lost momentum or completely fell apart. Furthermore, there was insufficient consultation with locals, resulting in misaligned priorities, such as repairing classrooms without addressing school dropout rates. Nike also lacked a structured exit or handover plan. When they departed, local stakeholders were often ill-equipped to assume operational and financial responsibilities. Beneficiaries became disillusioned when programs were discontinued abruptly.

A well-built sustainability plan has long-term objectives that align initiatives with both organizational strategy and real community needs. It emphasizes community ownership by involving local stakeholders from the beginning, ensuring relevance, buy-in, and transformation. More

so, it prioritises local capacity building for relevant people or institutions to manage and scale the initiatives and establishes an exit strategy that outlines how the initiatives can be self-sustaining with little or no input from the organization. Most importantly, it includes impact metrics that help in monitoring progress to guide growth, report success, and build trust and loyalty.

Besides creating a lasting impact, a sustainability plan is important for several other reasons. It strengthens brand equity by building a reputation for authenticity. People develop trust, loyalty, and confidence for organizations that carry out CSR projects from start to finish. Organizations also enjoy better ROI through maximized value for every shilling spent. The commitment to successfully complete projects instils confidence in staff, and since they are more inspired by programs with long-term purpose and impact, their output is often greater. Further, it allows for increased scalability as sustainable initiatives can potentially be replicated and expanded to benefit more communities.

CSR done right is legacy-focused; visibility is secondary. And legacy begins with sustainability. Therefore, regardless of how many resources an organization devotes to launching CSR initiatives, it should have a sustainability plan in place because the goal is not just to do good, but to do good that lasts.

Anthony Taiti is a Public Relations and Communication professional, currently serving as the National Director of The Overflow Communities Kenya, a Canadian-based NGO that empowers underprivileged children and youth in Kenya. You can connect with him via email at: ATaiti09@gmail.com.