Role of Media in Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development

'Always fight for progress and reform; Never tolerate injustice or corruption; Never lack sympathy for the poor; Always remain devoted to public welfare; Never be satisfied with merely printing the news; Always be drastically independent, and never be afraid to attack wrong.'

Jospeth Pulitzer, ‘Good News & Bad’ report

This case study is one of ten that was chosen as part of the Enhancing Business Community Relations Project. The purpose of this study is to document successful experiences as learning tools in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Lebanon. This case study shall study the “Role of Media in Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development” by addressing some questions and challenges objectively in a manner that will encourage different sectors to work more cohesively together to contribute to Lebanon’s socio-economic development.

The enclosed case study was written based on a detailed inquiry including a series of one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions with various stakeholders (employees, media representatives and community members), as well as collection of documentation on some companies operations and social activities through secondary sources and media sources. The findings and recommendations reflected in the document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of UNDP/UNV or the New Academy of business. It is important to note that these cases were written as examples of positive initiatives that have contributed to community. They do not constitute a comprehensive assessment of any company’s socially responsible behaviors.

The ‘Enhancing Business Community Relations’ project is a joint initiative between The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and the New Academy of Business. Implemented in seven developing countries, the purpose of the initiative was to collect and document information on business-community practices as perceived by all stakeholders, build partnerships with them and promote corporate social responsibility practices. It is also intended to enhance international understanding of business-community relations through information sharing and networking with other countries especially those participating in the project - Brazil, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Philippines, South Africa and Lebanon.
1. Introduction

The corporate social responsibility (CSR) concept has recently become more heavily widespread and at the heart of some companies agendas. One of the reasons for this heavy shift toward embracing social responsibility can be attributed to globalization, and pressure from many stakeholders (among them the media and the public) to ensure that companies’ practices do not negatively impact the environment and society. “Terms like ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ and ‘triple bottom line’ began to appear in European media in the mid – 1990’s. At that time, the media focus has either been on the thinking and initiatives of a handful of socially responsible entrepreneurs, among them Anita Roddick of The Body Shop International and Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry’s or on the mishap that have befallen a succession of the major companies in the area. Examples that spring to mind include Norsk Hydro (environmental contamination), Shell (marine ecology, human rights), Astra USA and Mitsubishi Motors (sexual harassment) Texaco (racial discrimination), Monsanto (GM foods), Nike (child labor) and Exxon Mobil (climate change)”

As the range of issues grew through the 1990’s, we saw a new trend – with some of the companies listed earlier, leading the change into the brave new world of corporate environmental and sustainable reporting. This community involvement has made companies realize that in order for them to remain competitive and ensure sustainability, they must address the needs of their shareholders in their business. It has also made them realize that this type of involvement can bring them many benefits, among them enhanced publicity.

Due to the fact that the media has an influential role on companies, and the public, this case study was selected to further explore the type of relationship that exists between the media and the private sector both globally and locally. It will shed light on the way the media perceive, prioritize and cover issues related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Sustainable Development (SD). It will also address some of the challenges faced by the media sector and provide some recommendations that will hopefully inspire all stakeholders to work more cohesively together to contribute to Lebanon’s socio-economic development.

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2 World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future, Oxford University Press, 1987
3 The terms ‘triple bottom line’ and ‘People, Planet, Profit’ were both coined by SustainAbility. In the Netherlands, the subsequent ‘Triple P’ is now seen to be central to CSR – see Corporate Social Responsibility: A Dutch Approach, Social and Economic Council, 2001.
2. Global Media coverage of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development.

To further clarify the picture on the role the global media play in portraying CSR and SD initiatives, the ‘Good News and Bad’ report was used. According to this report: ‘Progress with sustainable development requires the involvement of all sectors of society, not just business. The media’s understanding and sustained intelligent coverage of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Sustainable Development (SD) agendas is a necessary precondition for real progress.’

The report explained that the two main reasons, why the media doesn’t pick up on issues related to Corporate Social Responsibility, until its too late (or at least until a disaster occurs in a corporation) are: ‘Firstly because evolution has equipped us to respond to big, noisy, immediate threats, and to ignore problems that may present even greater risks, but which build more slowly. The second reason is for commercial self-interest, since many journalists that were interviewed wanted better coverage of the triple bottom line issues and trends, but their marketing people argued that readers, listeners or viewers are switched off by it. As a result, media companies prefer not to cover such issues in order to keep audiences happy. This makes intuitive sense, although some argue that the media under-estimates the audience’s readiness to tune in, if such issues are well presented. The key challenge is to find a way to tell these stories in a manner that engages, makes the connections to the ‘big picture’ and touches people’s lives.’ More information on how this can be done is available in Appendix –2-.

What has been mentioned earlier about the reasons why the media does not pick up on such issues was experienced in some countries that have also implemented the ‘Enhancing Business Community Relations’ project, specifically Ghana and the Philippines. For example, in Ghana, when soliciting media coverage for his efforts related to the business-community field, the project manager’s requests were either turned down, or not taken with enthusiasm. On one specific occasion, ‘of the 20 media houses that were invited to cover an event, only six turned up.’ In addition to that, all the print media personnel demanded money before featuring the event in their newspapers because such issues do not sell papers and therefore allocating space for the event was considered a very big favor.

Having said this, it is interesting draw some of the conclusions from the ‘Good News and Bad’ report about the level of coverage of social responsibility and sustainable development worldwide. In this regard, the report stated: ‘The European Union’s interest in the triple bottom line agenda both in the public mind and in the media has been sustained at higher levels than in the United States, Latin America and Asia. In comparison to Europe, ‘Latin America showed little interest, while the level of coverage in the Asian media has followed other world regions, albeit at lower levels, reinforcing the notion that CSR is not yet widely embraced as a management concept.’ How does Lebanon compare to other countries in terms of coverage? What type of relationship exists between the Lebanese media and the business sector? The following section will provide a general idea.

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7 Slavin T. Observer, Good News & Bad
8 Four print and two electronic media houses
9 Boetang. J., Business Community Relations Specialist, Ghana
3. Local Media Coverage

3.1 – Characteristics of the Lebanese media

Before answering the questions that were posed earlier, it may be worthwhile to understand the characteristics of the Lebanese media. In this regard, the report ‘Media in Lebanon—Public Access and Choice’ that was prepared by the Center for Media Freedom (CMF) in 1998 was valuable in providing an overview. According to the report, the media in all its forms is easily accessible in the Lebanese community and is widely available in three languages, Arabic, English and French. During the civil war, when local communities were fighting for survival, the media played an important role in bringing news to the public. It also played another important role during the post-war reconstruction phase in giving people new hope.

In Lebanon, all different forms of media have rules and regulations; however, according to some\textsuperscript{11}, unfortunately, not all regulations are always properly exercised. This became quite a ‘hot topic’ that was debated this year due to the closure of the ‘Murr TV’, as well as other accusations that were addressed to other TV stations over their coverage. Although the above-mentioned report is a little outdated (1998), it did confirm such regulations are not properly implemented. As stated: ‘The problems noted by observers and those affected by the laws have to do with implementation and application, rather than the legal provisions themselves…The main stipulations of the 1962 Press Law, which remains in force today, are that nothing may be published that endangers national security, national unity or state frontiers or that insults high-ranking Lebanese officials or a foreign head of state’.\textsuperscript{12} This has resulted in many perceptions and assumptions that certain interests are being served through media activity. In Lebanon, most, if not all media institutions are privately owned, and are known to have been initiated or backed up by political and business leaders. Examples of this are ‘FTV, LBC and the recently closed Murr TV’.

The challenges in the media field can be attributed to the fact that such institutions do not have vision and mission statements; codes of conduct, or even employee training to guide media representatives in their day-to-day work. This has had a negative effect on their level of transparency and accountability exercised.

3.2 – Summary of key findings and recommendations of the Lebanese media

Although the presence of statistics and concrete research is lacking in this regard, the following section provides a more general view based on some research that was conducted as part of the ‘Enhancing Business Community Relations’ (EBCR) project in Lebanon. While, no data exists to allow for a reasonable comparison between Lebanon and other countries worldwide to be made in terms of media coverage of CSR and SD topics, it might be fair to say that the country enjoys a relatively average amount of coverage, especially since over the past few years, the media has made an effort to increase its coverage on such issues. For example, in 1997/98 and 2000, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) organized a ‘Media Award’\textsuperscript{14}. Sponsored by ten leading national companies, this initiative was organized under the patronage of the Minister of Information in cooperation with the press syndicate and the journalists association. With the theme of “People Helping People”, the contest involved the media sector as the main partner. The main idea behind it was to encourage journalists and media personnel (through specialized training) to enhance their level of involvement in business-community initiatives, and to improve

\textsuperscript{11} Research Findings, ‘Enhancing Business Community Relations’ project, one-on-one interviews.

\textsuperscript{12} Media Environment in Lebanon’, Centre for Media Freedom- Middle East and North Africa,1998, page 9

\textsuperscript{13} Media Environment in Lebanon’, Centre for Media Freedom- Middle East and North Africa,1998, page 6

\textsuperscript{14} For more information, please visit www.undp.org.lb
coverage of these as well. Overall, the campaign was very successful and managed to raise a significant amount of awareness on development issues. Altogether, ninety-one journalists participated and delivered around 630 articles and documentaries related to the field of sustainable development.

In addition to the above-mentioned contest, there have been many other attempts to increase the media’s coverage of social issues. These include a workshop that was organized on this topic two years ago by the Lebanese American University, and another that was organized by the Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace. The later resulted in a publication titled ‘Promoting Civil Society in Lebanon’ on the workshop proceedings and research findings.

In order to further understand the relationship that exists between media agencies and the private sector, a focus group discussion was held at UNDP/UNV, as part of EBCR project. Around 15 individuals from Lebanon’s leading print and audiovisual media agencies gathered and discussed a series of questions (Please see Appendix –1) that aimed to:

- Assess the way the media perceive, prioritize and cover initiatives related to ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ and ‘Sustainable Development’;
- Obtain media representatives’ perceptions, opinion and knowledge of such practices in Lebanon;
- Explore the type of relationship that exists between the media and the private sector;
- Identify any challenges faced by the media while covering related issues;
- Provide a platform for sharing experiences between different media agencies;
- Sensitize the media on the pivotal role they can play in promoting social responsibility and sustainable development in the country;

The focus group and a series of other meetings were very beneficial at providing a general summary of the state of the media’s involvement and coverage of the business community field. The findings and recommendations that were generated can be found in the ‘National Research Report’ of the ‘Enhancing Business Community Relations’ project. However a brief summary is outlined below.

The findings showed that although many media representatives enjoy a moderate level of understanding of the terms ‘Corporate Social Responsibility, ‘Sustainable Development’ and/or ‘Business Community Relations’, they have provided very little coverage on the actual meanings of such terms. However, more recently, in the past year, the media (especially print media) has started doing so with providing increased coverage of community initiatives that were implemented by corporations. They were also very supportive of the EBCR project, by participating in many of its activities and providing coverage of them.

On the other hand, it was noted that there is a significant lack of trust between the media and corporations causing each sector to work individually. In this regard, the media’s point of view is that companies engage in community activities to ensure media coverage. As a result, they are sometimes reluctant to mention company names when reporting their practices due to ‘indirect publicity’ reasons. However, some representatives indicated that they were willing to mention company names, if they can foresee real results and impact on the ground, and if such organizations can be transparent and professional in reporting figures, statistics, reports, etc. outlining their impact on the community. On the flipside, corporations lack trust for the media because they feel that media agencies are not always accountable and transparent, and need to look at their own social responsibility. Many felt that the media should not be in a position to judge, especially, since many representatives get bribed to report certain issues. Other complaints that the media

15 More information on this focus group can be found in Appendix –1-
sector faced, were that many members from the public felt that this sector is only motivated by politics and comes to activities only when asked by politicians or highly political/important figures, and even when they show, they simply pick up press release and make a quick exit, as opposed to becoming involved in such events. Some media representatives confirmed this themselves, and stated that their own companies need to: establish a clear vision and mission statement that incorporate the community; develop codes of conduct, and finally provide their employees with ongoing training on transparency and accountability.

Among the most important recommendations that were provided, include the media to become more accountable, and transparent. This same recommendation was given in the ‘Good News & Bad’ report, which stated that: ‘Given the enormous influence they have on public opinion, public interest and ultimately, public behavior, it is important that media owners and directors meet the highest levels of accountability. For an industry whose greatest public service is to uncover malpractice and corruption at all levels of society, and to hold governments and business to account, media companies owe it all to their stakeholders and to society to be exceptionally transparent’.

Media representatives were encouraged to view themselves as partners in development by actively engaging in the implementation of community initiatives and providing coverage of them. While, private sector organizations were encouraged to do the same and to build trust with media organizations by being sincere and transparent. Corporations were also encouraged to communicate strategically with their own stakeholders and to view publicity resulting from community initiatives as only a very small aspect of their communication strategy. In this regard, such publicity should be complemented by concrete sincere strategies and actions, otherwise it will not even be effective, and will not yield the many benefits that usually come along with behaving in a socially responsible manner, such as: strengthened relationships with all stakeholders; improved human practices including employee morale, productivity, commitment and performance; and enhanced public image, visibility and reputation.

For real change to happen, each individual and senior manager (Including those leading media agencies) are encouraged to realize his/her responsibility towards their society, and to commit to making positive changes in the community. Such a change can only be achieved with trust, and a spirit of openness, cooperation and coordination between different sectors.

4- Conclusion

‘Successful development depends on the awareness, will and participation of the people. Lebanon has an advantage in terms of the number and diversity of written and audio-visual information media, which are important assets and an essential factor contributing to development. It is important that the diversity of institutions in the sector be maintained and developed as a source of wealth for the development

“The relation between the media and corporations has to be built on figures, transparency and trust. This would eventually lead to solid partnerships between the media and private sector. As a reporter, I totally appreciate such initiatives, especially when I see results on the ground instead of just being invited to ceremonies and conferences. We are ready to help especially when we are treated like partners in implementing such projects, instead of just a publicity tool. Only then will our message be transmitted with impact!”

Tania Mehanna, Reporter, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International

16 Good News & Bad, report. Please review Appendix –2- for a list of recommendations in relation to media governance, accountability, transparency and trust.
‘The information media can act as channels for dialogue and interaction between citizens, and as instruments for diffusing developmental awareness, and a spirit of solidarity and joint action, and for consolidating the common cultural elements necessary for development to succeed.’

‘The media constitute a powerful mechanism of monitoring and accountability on behalf of the people. The role of the information media in this respect takes on added significance when channels or mechanisms of dialogue are weak or hardly exist, and operations lack in transparency’, which is the case in a country like Lebanon. The most important thing is for the media to be transparent and accountable, because they perform a critical function in holding other parts of society to account. But who holds the media to account?

Media coverage of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development can do wonders for both companies and the community. Companies, who sincerely try to do good for their community by committing their human and financial resources to developmental projects, benefit by receiving publicity and eventually enhanced reputation. As discussed in this case study, unfortunately, this has not always been the case, both in Lebanon and globally. To address this challenge, it is important for the media to enhance its’ understanding of the field and to realize that some companies truly deserve to receive such publicity in return for their efforts. Such publicity will in turn inspire other organizations to get involved, thus bring about more initiatives that will benefit the community and will enhance a cycle of sustainability.

The key theme that was indirectly addressed through this case study is not only about the power of media in development, but about the power and importance of strategic communication. Such communication is not only important for companies, but for media agencies, government institutions, NGOs, etc. It is only through this, that real progress for sustainable development can take place. This can be summed by the following quote from the ‘Good News and Bad’ report: ‘In our view, strategic communications will be a critical asset for any organization-be it from the public arena, the private sector or civil society in the years to come. We believe communications can play an important role in dispelling confusion, resolving conflict and bringing parties together for the improvement of our world.

17 National Human Development Report of Lebanon, 1998, Chapter 4, p.21
18 National Human Development Report of Lebanon, 1998, Chapter 4, p.21
19 National Human Development Report of Lebanon, 1998, Chapter 4, p.21
Appendix –1-
Focus Group Discussion Questions – UNDP/UNV

Through a series of predetermined questions, media representatives were asked the following:

- What do you known about CSR/BCR?
- Do you think that companies have a responsibility to engage in community practices? Please explain the role that you feel companies in society?
- What do you think constitutes an irresponsible company?
- Given price and quality are equal, would you support a product/company that you know is more socially responsible?
- What is the most important factor in forming an opinion of a company?
- Who do you trust most to work in the best interest of society?
- Do you think that CSR/BCR is widespread in the country?
- Are you satisfied with the type of CSR/BCR practices that exists in the country?
- Have you noticed an increase/decrease in CSR/BCR?
- What type/size/structure of companies do you feel are socially responsible in Lebanon?
- Can you mention names of companies that you feel have been socially responsible?
- Can you mention names of companies that you feel have NOT been socially responsible?
- Which social fields do you feel are most supported by organizations?
- What do you think are the motives behind a company to get involved in CSR/BCR?
- In you opinion, what are some reasons why organizations might not get in involved in community projects?
- Do you agree that community involvement is beneficial to an organization in terms of enhancing its respect, brand image and reputation, increasing attractiveness to investors, strengthening HR practices, financial performance and relationships with all stakeholders.
- What do you think of CSR/BCR’s potential in Lebanon?
- Can you recommend any future projects related to the BCR field?
- How do you perceive, priorities and cover issues related to CSR/BCR? How important are they? How often are these issues covered? What section are they covered in? How big are the articles written about CSR/BCR?
- The media is said to be the most powerful industry that can influence how people and politicians think of CSR/BCR. What do you think is the media’s role in Lebanon in highlighting CSR/BCR practices?
- When covering initiatives related to CSR/BCR, do you normally mention company names and types of contributions? If no, why not? And what can be done about it?
- In your opinion what are the challenges/ difficulties for the media to cover CSR/BCR initiatives? (e.g. time factor, not a priority, difficulty in dealing with the community / corporations etc)
- Based on the NGOs survey, and conversations with NGOs/ community members, there seems to be a communication gap between private sector organizations and NGOs. What do you think can be done to bridge that gap?
- What mechanisms can be put in place to make CSR/BCR more effective? (e.g. NGO/Public Opinion survey, government lobbying? Establishment of a CSR/BCR reporting law?) What role can the media play in enhancing awareness/effectiveness of CSR/BCR in Lebanon?
- What can be done to highlight a more ‘partnership’ oriented approach between various stakeholders? How can the media to be seen as a partner as well?
- Will you be interested in increased you role in enhancing awareness of CSR/BCR initiatives in Lebanon? If so, how do you feel you can contribute?
Appendix 2-
Recommendations from the ‘Good News & Bad’ Report

Tips for reporting on Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development

1) Make the links to the big picture
2) Build trust through factual and technical accuracy
3) Be cool, be sexy
4) Invite readers, listeners or viewers to join a successful global movement.
5) Tell powerful stories
6) Project optimism and avoid guilt
7) Press the ‘glory button’ to help people feel good taking small initial steps.
8) Use inclusive language, breaking stereotypes.
9) Spotlight heroes to emulate.
10) Link big ideas with everyday realities and interests.

Recommendations on accountability, transparency, governance and trust

1) Establish – at board level – whether the balance between public interest and commercial imperatives is being strategically reviewed, properly managed and publicly disclosed;
2) Review their goals, targets and performance against leading governance codes (including the UN Global Compact, the Global Sullivan Principles and SA 8000) and socially responsible investment (SRI) criteria.
3) Consider compliance with laws, regulations and industry and codes as the absolute minimum for good governance – and commit to ‘beyond compliance’ standards wherever possible;
4) Adopt and publicize ethical codes of conduct, and clear statements of corporate values and principles;
5) Engage regularly with key stakeholders, ensuring that inclusive policies and processes are adopted right across the business.
6) Provide leadership in terms of triple bottom accounting, auditing and reporting;
7) Disclose all proprietal cross-ownerships and influence;
8) Declare editorial policy – both general and issue specific – and political allegiances;
9) Be open in relation to all sources of funds that could influence editorial and programming content – including their biggest advertisers, sponsors and production subsidies;
10) Regularly report direct and indirect lobbying activities, both undertaken and accepted.