
HARNESSING THE ESSENCE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The United Nations member states agreed to pursue 17 monumental and ambitious goals with 169 targets intended to deal with extreme poverty, terminate hunger and other socio-economic conditions with environmental issues and make the world a better place by 2030. The agenda was released with excitement and great hope of achievement. It is expected that various government and stakeholders will devote all available resource to achieving these goals. Identified among these stakeholders is the private sector consisting of business organizations. It is considered that the corporate social responsibility model which hitherto has been a self-regulating model with social responsibility reporting as a means of communicating the involvement of companies in raising the socio-economic condition of their business environments become an immediate platform to further participate in the realization of the sustainable development goals. This paper analyses the relationships between SDGs and CSR and suggests that governments can further enhance corporate bodies participation by strengthening the CSR ideals and moving it from a voluntary activity to mandatory responsibility. It recommends that each country should provide commitment thresholds and making social responsibility accounting compulsory.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are a wide range of goals intended by the United Nations to become an action plan for all member nations and stakeholders. The achievements of which are to bring an end to poverty,

protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. These goals are seventeen (17) with 169 targets and represent a robust ambition to lift the world citizens out of extreme poverty on to a sustainable and resilient path. (Bennett, Jessani&Glandon, 2020).

According to Jones et al (2017), these goals are quite ambitious and detailed and represent a vision for the future with a serious attempt to positively impact human environment, address social and economic issues, including climate change, energy, water, marine conservation, bio-diversity, poverty, food supply and security, sustainable production and consumption, healthcare, education, gender equality, peace and economic growth. This is a bold attempt to finish off what the Millennium Development Goals did not achieve and the proffering of a holistic solution to human problems (United Nations, 2015).

Various governments are expected to develop national strategies and adequately consistent commitment to the realization of these goals. However, the Memorandum of Understanding signed by different member countries also recognizes the importance of collaborative partnership of other stakeholders in achieving these goalsUnited Nations (2015). Jones et al (2017) emphasized the role of the business community commitment in the pursuit of these goals. The role of other stakeholders was referred to as ‘Global partnership’ (Scholz & Brandi (2018). In reference to this, the UN declaration emphasized a determined will to mobilize the means required to implement the agenda by invoking the “spirit of global solidarity” with the participation of all stakeholders and all people (United Nation, 2015, Brever& Leining, 2021).

The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of all firms presents a platform for companies to become ready partners to all governments of various countries to realize these goals. The focus of this paper is to present CSR as a ready means by which the laudable goals of the United Nations couldbe easily realized. Corporations are organized firms operating in different countries to satisfy the goals of different shareholders (www.unido.org). However, the goals of firms have extended to meeting the needs of not just shareholders but various stakeholders which include the government, employees, the community of its operation and a host of others (Stobierski, 2021). The social responsibilities of firms to these stakeholders could mean satisfying the needs of sustainable development.

The Concept of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a concept with long historical root according to Grober (2012) in Jones et al (2019). Lawrence (2018) says sustainable development effort became more coordinated in recent years thus signifying a recognition or awareness for the need long before now. The world and the insatiable nature of man has always craved development. Much of the advancement in science and technology, commerce and industrialization have their roots in the desire to always live better and more convenient. Development hinges on available human and natural resources which are limited. This brings about the idea of having developments which are sustainable in the long run and which does not jeopardize future development and existence.

Sustainable development has been variously described and defined mostly in view of meeting the present needs without compromising the future generation's meetings their needs (Adeyumo&Adejumo, 2014). The core of sustainable development discussion revolves around environmental preservation that caters for the needs of present generations and also allows the posterity to use same without deprivation.

Alternatively, the development in the present time which use up available resource can substitute used resources with adequate technological inventions for the future thereby enhancing sustainability. Adejumo&Adejumo (2014) states that sustainable development means not using up resources faster than the planet can replenish or re-stock. This shapes the decision of governments, organization and corporate bodies informing policies to preserve their environments. Brundtland report (1987) defines sustainable development as "the developments that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The idea of sustainable development came from the global challenge of increasing human activities on the environment. According to the Brundt report, life expectancy has increased, population is also increasing with increasing human activities on the environment. This has also led to more people getting hungry in the world. (Brundt land report, 1987, Youmatter, 2020). Economic growth has led to increasing depletion of natural resource and great measure of industrial pollution which has resulted to unfavorable climatic change (Youmatter, 2020).

The whole idea of sustainable development is about how society can exist in a long term. Events from 19th century that has seen the world

experiencing ecological and social crises make it imperative for governments and established institutions like the United Nations to become aware that a more sustainable development programme is necessary to keep the world going (Youmatter, 2020).

United Nations Development Goals.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are goals developed into an agenda for the members countries to lift people of the nations of the world out of extreme poverty and hunger among many other objectives (Breuer & Leininger (2021); Bennett *et. al.* (2020). The problems bedeviling the human race were considered critical needing concerted effort of all nations to eradicate. These goals synchronized together cover people, planet and prosperity of human race. The agenda consists of 17 goals with 169 targets. All the goals are integrated which means that achieving any of the goals has the ability to impact on the fulfillment of others.

The scope of the goals include economics, social and environmental aspects of human existence. The agenda is considered historic because it is comprehensive, far reaching and people oriented which has transformative ability and to be achieved by 2030 (UN, 2015). If implemented, it will end poverty, hunger and also combat inequalities within and also among countries. These are seen as laudable goals but it has been criticized for being too ambitious. According to Mensah and Casadevall(2019), the UN sustainable development is a well applauded catchphrase,nevertheless the concept seems unclear in terms of history and meaning but couldremain a pervasive paradigm for a long time.

The goals have been stratified to reflect major areas of human considerations (Morton, S., Pencheons&Squires (2019). The first stratification refers to as 'people's', the goals to be achieved include: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well being: quality education: gender equality and clean water and sanitation. These have direct and immediate impact on world citizens majority of who live on less than \$1.25 per day and seen as vulnerable to extreme hunger and poverty. The second set of goals affect the planet and has climate action goal, life below water goal and life on land goals. Much of human action have impacted on the environment therefore needs sustainable effort to keep it going. These goals are to redeem the environment.

Other goals affecting human prosperity are listed in the third strata. These include affordable clean energy, decent work and economic

development goal, industry, innovation and infrastructure goal, sustainable cities and community goal: and responsible assumption and production goal. These goals are believed to stimulate human happiness. The last set of goals are peace, justice and strong institution goal and partnerships for the set goal.

In other to achieve these goals, the agenda calls for collaborative efforts among the 193 member nations of the United Nations. The intention is that no one is left behind with the idea that nations will progressively develops and level up with developed ones. (Mortion et at, 2017). It is important to observe that these goals are voluntary commitments without legal implication except that members are encourage to work at fulfilling them for the betterment of their citizens.

Participating Stakeholders

The sustainable development goals are primarily for UN member countries to achieve. Jones et at (2017) emphasized the part of other stakeholders apart from governments of each country. Sachs, Schmidt, Mazzicatoet. al. (2019) states that business community has a vitally important role to play in addressing these goals. These goals are so diverse and therefore give room for wider participation of different stakeholders. Freyling (2015), states that though national governments have responsibility for localization and implementation of SDGs, yet local and subnational governments being stakeholders also have the responsibility of bearing the task of providing most of the needed progress.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social affairs recognized involving participation of those officially called “Major Groups”. According to Sachs, Schmidt, Mazzucatoet. al. (2019). This group include business and industrial sector. Corporate Social Responsibility evolves from the activities of the business and industry and represents a serious means of achieving the SDGs. Leal Filho and Brandi (2016) states that organizations are required and possibly enforced to consider their business activities and determine their long-term social and environmental impacts in order to ameliorate the problems they may cause.

A responsibility platform for business organization to participate well in sustainable development of the world is to adopt Corporate Social Responsibility for attainment of SDGs.

Meaning and Objectives of CRS

Corporate Social responsibility according to Fernando (2021) and Barnet (2021) is a business model that helps a company socially accountable to itself, other stakeholders and the public. This is a self-regulating business practice that forms part of the strategy of the organization in branding its products while becoming responsible to the environment of its operation (Stobierski, 2021). It is a strategic initiative considered voluntary but which adds value to brands' reputation. Attempts have been made in different countries to make the implementation of CSR go beyond compliance with regulatory requirements because of the importance to development.

Crowther and Aras (2008) opined that CSR is a concept which has become dominant in business reporting. This is because the strategic and ethical responsibilities of a corporation to the stakeholders, the government, employees and the community where it is operating always demand a report of this responsibility for their knowledge and assessment of the firm's impact on the society (Omesi, 2018). Firms engage in economic activities that make them draw input from the society, it is ethically required to give back to that same society as a way of acknowledging its impact on the environment and also responsible in solving many of the social problems affecting the society and its environment (Satish, 2020).

Corporate Social responsibility becomes essential to every firm as a way of giving back to the stakeholders part of the gains earned from operating among them (Barnet, 2021). CSR is both strategic and ethical. It is strategic because while contributing to the betterment of the environment, it is also branding its product. As a matter of ethics, firms contribute to the economy, social upliftment of its people bearing in mind some of the negative impact of its operation and also preserve the environment.

CSR according to Salish (2020) and Osemekete *et al.* (2016) is a voluntary engagement of firms in most countries. However in the recent time, most countries are stepping up efforts to make companies disclose their commitment through social responsibilities accounting (Latapi, Agudelo *et al.* 2019); Kurian 2018). A responsible firm cleans up the environment from pollutions, avoids degradation and depletion of naturally available resources by engaging in activities that are positive. Commitment to its staff development and welfare, appropriate remuneration and ensuring job satisfaction are considered as social responsibility. It is an act of social responsibility for a company to be involved in philanthropic gestures to the community. Such a

firm could build roads, schools, hospitals provide scholarship for indigene students of its host community. According to Youmatter (2020), Corporate Social responsibility is based on sustainable mindset.

A growing trend in CSR discussion is the transition from ethical issue where corporation assesses itself and determine its commitment to its external environment and report same to government regulations which demands from each firm certain actions which signifies their commitment to their stakeholders and report on such actions(Latapi, Aqudelo*et. al.* 2021).

Intersection of Sustainable Development and Social Responsibility

Business communities as role players in the realization of sustainable development around the world by 2030 already possess a mode of operation for participation (Kurian, 2018). The definition of CSR by European Union Green paper in 2001 clearly links corporate social responsibility to sustainable development. It states that it is “the voluntary integration of companies’ social and ecological concerns into their business activities and their relationship with their stakeholders” (Youmatter, 2020). This view is similar to the position of the International Standard Organization (ISO) on CSR. The ISO sees CSR as “the responsibility of an organization for impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment resulting in ethical behaviour and transparency which contributes to sustainable development”.

The relationship between corporate social responsibility and sustainable development according to Youmatter, (2020) dates back to 1950s in America. It was believed among many managers then that companies have more to gain if they look beyond profits and consider the impact of their activities on their society and environments. The concern for the environment began the move towards achieving corporate social responsibility. While pursuing corporate goals and the pleasure of shareholders companies, managers directly or indirectly satisfy the aspirations of the people, environment, the planet and the prosperity of humanity. (KDMG, 2017).

Efforts have been made by companies in Nigeria to contribute to the realization of the sustainable development goals on the basis of their corporate social responsibility. An instance of a connection between corporated social responsibility and sustainable development goals in Nigeria was stated in Aikulola (2020). A project was designed by the Coca-Cola Foundation (TCCF) to cushion the hardship caused by the covid-19 pandemic in which 300 persons were empowered in the impoverished communities of their operation. This act

was referred to as “the project designed to contribute to several of the sustainable development goals (SDGs)”. The empowerment had an effect of promoting a greener environment. Adepetun (2020) opines that “impact investment and funding will be crucial to Nigeria attaining the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”. Impact investing are “investments made into companies, organizations, funds, with the intention to generate social and environmental impact alongside a financial return. (Adepetun, 2020).

These are some of the possibilities of the private sector’s participation in the realization of the SDGs. However it has been noted that getting private sector participation on the scale that will enhance the fulfillment of the dream has remained a challenge according Uwais in Adepetun (2020). The reason for paucity in participation of the private sector is because the CSR is still voluntary in Nigeria even though communities are demanding for more responsibilities from the firms and multinationals operations in their domain.

Conclusion

The ambitious UN enacted Sustainable Development Goals are indeed laudable and promising in its entirety to make the world a better place by 2030 and thereafter. Though some persons criticized the goals as too ambitious (Swain & Yang-Wallentin, (2020), they are certain ways of building on the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals. Nations are attempting to achieve these goals with other stake holder because of the limited resources of governments. It has been observed that the way humans do things will determine the extent of the achievement of the goals. Adepetun (2020) agrees that the food people consume; the cloth we wear and attitude to disposing waste will all contribute to success or failure of the agenda.

An obvious fact is the constraints impose because of fund in achieving these goals by different nations especially the less developed ones (Newman, 2020). However, an existing model for realizing these goals is the corporate responsibility. The social responsibilities of firms present a ready platform for systematic actualization of these objectives. Although CSR is largely ethical responsibility for firms in many countries, more demands are made of firms both to be committed and also report the extent of their responsibility in their annual reports. Many countries are making social responsibility accounting or report mandatory (Satish, 2020).

It is necessary for governments to harness the potentials of corporate social responsibility in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. Equally firms inadvertently promote their brands and make more profits by their commitment to socio-economic development of the community of their operation. The intersection and connection of the two variables – SDGs and CSR can protect the environment for sustainable development and lead to a remarkable achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Recommendations

In order to promote the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development Goals the following recommendations are made.

- i. All member states of the United Nations should make corporate Social Responsibility Mandatory for all firms;
- ii. All companies, as a matter of disclosure requirement, must publish alongside their financial statements their extent of involvement in social responsibilities through social responsibilities accounting;
- iii. As already carried out in other countries; there should be penalty for companies' failure to be responsible to their environment;
- iv. Companies should harness the benefits of CSR for better branding of products and profits;
- v. Stakeholders in companies' should demand for more commitment to the environment by firms.

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Harnessing the Essence of Corporate Social Responsibility to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria

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