**Doing better business**

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What value does corporate social responsibility (CSR) bring to business in Pakistan?
A softer, more caring public image.
But more importantly, the act of practicing CSR holds businesses accountable to communities and consumers.
And this means businesses are forced to improve their practices to acquiesce to the demands of the public.
For a country like Pakistan, CSR can be a catalyst for positive change.
Corporate social responsibility is defined by the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) as “a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders”.
CSR has seen uptake by large multinational corporations and local companies in Pakistan in an attempt to practice business in a more humane and ethical manner; balancing it with a more single-minded profit-driven model.
CSR activities range from donating money to charitable organisations to implementing large scale organic programmes such as the Pepsi ‘Litre of Light’ project (where discarded bottles were used as solar lights in off-grid areas).
The act of practicing CSR means recognising that business can do damage to the environment and people, and alleviating these possible pain points in creative and strategic ways.
CSR can undoubtedly be viewed from a public relations standpoint.
There are materialistic perks to organising a splashy, front-page-coverage event where an atypical suppressed group is empowered in some way or the other.
But for a country like Pakistan, isn’t the reach to as many minorities and oppressed groups as possible a good thing?
According to the World Bank, just under 12 million people live in poverty in Pakistan.
If CSR activities mean that corporations use their platforms to amplify and highlight issues and subsequently address them—where’s the harm in that?
The vast sums that are spent on marketing and publicity are rivalled only by the investments that are made into improving the environment and society at large.
Public suspicion of CSR may also read initiatives such as planting trees or building a school as humdrum, apologetic manoeuvres by hungry capitalists. But the truth could not be further.
Businesses in Pakistan are forced to reckon with the cost of having environmentally or socially unwelcome practices by government regulation as well as pressure groups such as climate activists and local community members.
This extrinsic motivation compels much business in Pakistan to try to do better, and this accountability means good news for the long-awaited reversal of damage to natural resources as well as affiliated groups and consumers.
CSR in Pakistan can and does champion a lot of mitigation of adverse effects to climate by planting trees or reducing waste in the manufacturing sectors, along with supporting culturally weak groups such as laborers and women through compliance with laws and empowerment initiatives.
There is also an intrinsic drive to strategise for and deploy CSR initiatives. Spending money on non-profit organisations gives tax rebates back to corporate organisations that would otherwise have to pay tax on that income.
In a way, spending on strategic CSR activities also benefits the corporation—it saves it money and also gets it a good deal of enamour for publicly geared activities.
While companies have found a way to make the selfless act of CSR a coinciding act of saving money, this does not demerit their efforts to practice CSR or its widespread impact.
CSR in Pakistan ranges across all sectors and provinces and covers all aspects of life including: health, education, women empowerment, climate, natural resources, the environment, community wellbeing, energy, and others.
This broad focus ensures that despite the financial kickbacks that corporations enjoy due to CSR, they are also leading change in much needed areas of society.
The future of CSR in Pakistan will have to align with the 2030 SDGs, as at present, it does not blend into a cohesive, nation-wide targeted approach to improving standards of living.
At present, CSR initiatives are being driven by demands of the public as well as individual company-centric motives to create public good.
In the future, more companies should also reflect on the role that CSR can play in defining their business practices, as it has proven to be a winning deal for those that have taken it on.