

A corporate earning curve

ONCE called "social responsibility", the conscience of business in South Africa is now known as "corporate social involvement" (CSI) and it has joined terms such as "community empowerment" and "transparency of the process" that have become very much a part of the change jargon in South Africa. Sadly, like the other terms, CSI is a meaningless acronym unless it is given real meaning in the communities business targets for its programmes.

In a climate in which the relevance of the present economic system and the role of business engagement programmes are frequently questioned, CSI potentially could perform an important role in empowering communities to meet the challenges of a democratised South Africa.

However, those who implement these programmes face the difficult task of engaging communities that are often disorganised and fraught with conflict. This has meant that unless the programmes are sensitively negotiated with all stakeholders in the communities, even more conflict may be created or else a project, such as a sports field built at huge cost, could lie unused while the community argue.

In broad terms, the transition to democracy implies that the relationship between the communities targeted for CSI and the new government will hopefully be radically altered. "One person, one vote" should mean that an accountable government – answerable to the new electorate and its priorities – will come into existence. This in turn means that business, which until now was seen as a conduit for pressure on the state, will now be subject to state pressure.

It is our belief that business needs to redefine its role in our changing society or face having it changed by a majority of people who have had very little to celebrate about the economy and the inactive role of business.

It is accepted that a very limited number of people are affected by the formal economy. The benefits experienced by the black community include wages paid to the workers, the products themselves and social responsibility programmes.

For unemployed and uneducated youth, restructuring the economy to meet their needs must be a high priority. The demand is

Business must begin to earn its keep with workers and the community at large, writes STEVE COLLINS and CHARLES TALBOT who have been talking with the business sector and communities of Natal around corporate social involvement.

for a better life than the one they have and it will be up to business to take these high expectations seriously. Arguments about the failure of socialism will not be sufficient for angry and disaffected youth. The question that needs to be answered is what tangible benefits have capitalism and a free market brought to the majority so far.

Cosatu and other unions have already begun the process of defining how business engagement should occur. The establishment of the National Economic Forum and several regional forums represents a commitment by unions and business to take joint responsibility for restructuring the economy. This co-operation reflects a realisation that the growth of the economy is not just the concern of business and government, but also of workers involved in the economy.



Business's role: going beyond the workplace.

BRETT ELOFF, Southlight

These tripartite forums are significant arenas for discussion and democracy. However, unless the communities are also engaged in some way, the trade unions may be left with the responsibility for community input. This is why, at company level, unions are arguing for communities to be involved in decision-making processes about CSI programmes. They are also pushing for CSI programmes to form part of the economic growth and development strategies in the areas concerned.

This requires an important shift in the thinking of CSI advocates. No longer is it good enough to talk about the number of schools and creches built. It has been acknowledged that this should have been the government's responsibility in the first place, and that business is simply trying to make up in a small way for corruption in the civil service and some of the worst excesses of apartheid.

Besides meeting an obvious need for educational infrastructure, these projects were motivated very often by the desire of business to show communities that they had made a contribution. In reality though, it would become just another school where disempowering education was enforced – if the community could find the teachers to fill the positions.

Recognising this, several businesses in Natal have tried other approaches of engagement that may have better long-term results. The approach has been to find ways in which a community could be empowered through access to what it regards as a priority.

In one instance, a town planner was employed jointly by a company and a residents' association. The company paid his fee but his services were at the disposal of the residents' association. Members of the asso-

ciation also received some soft skills training (committee skills and how to access IDT funds for development) while a road building project was in progress.

The importance of this approach lies in the fact that ownership rests firmly with the community and not the company. However, it was clearly the company that made it possible for the town planner to play such a role. A similar situation occurred when a company paid for two paralegals to assist a number of communities in dealing with violence and a lack of proper

policing.

The manner in which CSI happens is therefore more important than the development ideas themselves or actual bricks and mortar projects.

Involving communities in decision-making process is easier said than done, however. It requires firstly that capacity-building must form part of any project with a particular focus on basic organisational skills. The

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and limiting violence.

Fourthly, the society in which we live has become extremely well armed. The present strategy of substantial penalties for the possession of "illegal" weapons will not work. Police bias in the distribution of licences will ensure that it becomes a political football with the only consequences a better concealment of unlicensed weapons and a worse reputation of political bias for the police. Nor will rewards work under the present situation where possessing a weapon has substantial utility value, either for personal protection or for criminal intent.

At some point in the political process there will have to be a multi-party effort to reduce the number of weapons both licensed and unlicensed. Symbolic laying down of arms, confidence in the ability of police to provide protection, leadership public statements and actions, stronger regulatory mechanisms over import and production of certain categories of weapons, and rewards appropriate to our context will all be required. In Mozambique the strategy was "food for weapons", here it might be "jobs for weapons".

Finally, a corps of neutral peace brokers with recognised bona fides and the ability to communicate regularly with all parties, organisations and institutions is required. In some situations, ordinary people may have achieved this status within the community. But in many places in South Africa we do not have such resources.

A model worth considering is the Community Relations Service set up in the USA during the period of the civil rights



Elections under civilian control, but police must protect voters.

movement and still operative today. Here a relatively small group of officials is available to fly in to a situation of violence or potential violence. They have the status of the government of the day and skills in conciliation and mediation. They are already accepted by the various parties and have the "clout" necessary to gain access to party officials and state officials. It does not seem to be beyond the realms of possibility for a Transitional Executive Council to establish such a specialist group here. Unlike the investigative wing of the Goldstone Commission, its officers would not be engaged in investigation and adjudication. Their job would be communi-

boxes and certified and counted ballots. This role should only be carried out by a regular uniformed police force. Other units with specialised functions and uniforms should not be used in order to maintain the image of an election under civilian control.

The SAP members who are to be deployed on election day should receive training regarding their role and the Electoral Act, and go through various simulations in order to ensure that they understand what is required of them over and above normal policing activities.

Any decision to deploy either the SADF or special units of the SAP such as the Internal Stability Unit should be made by the TEC in conjunction with monitoring groups.

Both international and local monitoring programmes will have to be organised and will operate independently of, but in communication with the police and electoral authorities.

Electoral education

Finally the citizens of South Africa must be educated. An educated electorate will resort less to irrational behaviour, will be more likely to resist misconduct by the parties, will be more apt to draw these misconducts to public notice, and will have more commitment to participating in and accepting the outcome of the election.

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importance of these skills should not be under-estimated. It is with the knowledge of how to organise, run a meeting and deal with state funders that a community will access much more than any business CSI project could provide.

The communities referred to earlier saw that business did indeed have an important role to play in building democracy. This was because it made available services that empowered the community. In the past, business was criticised on the basis that it neither engaged the state itself nor did it help communities to do so.

In the future, business cannot afford to

stand by and let the state do as it pleases. If it wants support for its cause, business will have to assist communities in making their voices heard. Business people will also have to do some shouting themselves, not in favour of one or the other political party, but rather for the cause of economic growth and development.

In the economic forums space now exists for them to define what is best – alongside the communities who are always the first to feel the effects of a worsening economy.

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