

Islands of initiative

Although there is increasing interest in CSR in the Caribbean, there is still much work to be done to establish programs and practices

by Cloreth Greene, ABC

The Corporate Social Responsibility Mapping Project is expected to be the catalyst that takes Trinidad and Tobago through the transition from philanthropy to CSR.

In the 21st century, corporate social responsibility, or CSR, has become a catchphrase. But while many use the term, few understand what it means.

CSR is described as “the integration of business operations and values, whereby the interests of all stakeholders including investors, customers, employees, the community and the environment are reflected in the company’s policies and actions,” according to CSRwire, a private firm that provides news and information on various social responsibility and sustainability initiatives. In recent years there has been growing global interest in learning about and practicing CSR principles, to the extent that a variety of organizations and institutions offer sessions on it—from the World Bank Institute’s CSR and Sustainable Competitiveness course, to professional development courses



through Harvard University’s CSR Initiative, to myriad corporate training programs.

But studies have found that so far CSR has been slow to catch on in the Caribbean. Estrella Peinado-Vara, a consultant in the private enterprise and financial markets department at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), conducted a study in June 2004 on behalf of the IDB titled “Corporate Social

Responsibility in Latin America and the Caribbean.” Her report found that:

- **CSR activity still looks** relatively weak and unevenly distributed in Latin America and the Caribbean, with very few companies adopting a formal CSR agenda that ensures healthy working conditions and livable communities.
- **CSR can be considered** a growing movement, still in its infancy, and in many cases is still viewed as corporate philanthropy.
- **Although there are signs** of increasing interest in CSR, there is still much to do in promoting real implementation of CSR programs and in disseminating the social and economic benefits of CSR practices.
- **Responsible companies** can make a significant—if not critical—difference in the social and economic development of the region.

Since the report's publication, some Caribbean-based companies have become active in CSR projects, making efforts to incorporate CSR concepts into their mission, vision and policies. Ian Cooper, former country manager of Scotiabank Guyana, is quoted on the BBC web site as saying, "We [Scotiabank] define CSR as the way we interact with all of our stakeholders (shareholders, customers, employees and the community) to meet our social, economic, environmental and ethical responsibilities." He said the company practices CSR through strong support of projects such as West Indies Cricket and Kiddy Cricket, HIV/AIDS awareness programs, Breast Cancer Day fundraising, and a recycling program.

Trinidad and Tobago has approached CSR even more directly, signing on to the U.N. Global Compact on 15 January 2007. The South Trinidad Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association are the first two local organizations within Latin America and the Caribbean to join the Compact. The Corporate Social Responsibility Mapping Project, as it is called, is expected to be the catalyst that takes Trinidad through the transition from philanthropy to CSR. As its main objective, "the CSR Mapping Project is to provide a baseline and a resource that will inform and direct the development of corporate social responsibility in Trinidad and Tobago in order to help the private sector play a more meaningful role in T&T's social development."

The first report from that project, published in late 2007, figured prominently in Barbados at a conference promoting CSR in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Caribbean, a partnership between the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Young Americas Business Trust, and the Caribbean Association for Industries and Commerce. The first of these "training of trainers" workshops was held in Trinidad and Tobago in September 2007. The five main objectives were:

- **Define CSR** and its main concepts, and understand international frameworks, standards and guidelines and how they can be applied to SMEs in the Caribbean.
- **Share, use and adapt** case studies and practical CSR examples from international and Caribbean sources.
- **Support and encourage** SMEs already involved in CSR to continue the journey toward social and environmental responsibility.
- **Use tools, resources** and lessons learned to support the implementation of CSR in SMEs.
- **Understand** the Caribbean business environment and provide material for trainers interested in supporting the implementation of CSR in the region.

In March 2006, Kami Huysse's Communication Overtones blog (overtonecomm.blogspot.com) included a post stating that CSR is public relations of the highest magnitude

because it requires actions and not just words: "CSR is more than just donating money or getting involved in community causes; it is also engaging stakeholders in their concerns, driving principled behavior through strong corporate values, and using the corporate influence to ensure a sustainable world."

Business professionals, particularly those at the management level, should always be mindful of this definition. It speaks to the fuel that drives the CSR engine in any corporation. CSR cannot exist without the implementation of sound, effective and sustained communication tools via a well-trained, professional and motivated communication team. •

about the author

Cloeth Greene, ABC, is a strategic communicator, certified facilitator and entrepreneur. She owns and operates the communication consultancy Wild & Wonderful, and was 2006–2007 president of the IABC/Caribbean chapter, which serves 13 Caribbean territories.

IABC participates in CSR standards project

As a global professional organization, IABC took the lead in exhibiting its commitment to CSR. In March 2007, IABC became an official partner of the ISO 26000 initiative, which is being developed by a consortium of experts in various countries and from 35 liaison organizations, including the U.N. Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, the World Health Organization and the Centre for Social Responsibility. An IABC subcommittee has been set up to drive the project.

"We know that professional communicators not only provide exceptional communication guidance and leadership but also can serve as strategic partners to their organizations. We not only communicate change, we drive change," says Michelle Bernhart, head of the committee.

The group is currently providing recommendations on a section of the ISO guidance document that focuses on communicating about social responsibility, emphasizing the role of the communication professional in planning and implementing social responsibility programs. Says Michael Zimet, a committee member and head of IABC's Advocacy Work Group, "The ISO project truly gives IABC and the communication profession a seat at a very important global table. Not only are we able to contribute to an important ISO standard, but our involvement with ISO also ties in with the work of the Advocacy Committee and serves as a first step for exploring our own role in social advocacy."

—C.G.