

Reflections on CSR in Kenya and China in Africa

By Wayne Visser

Last week, I was hosted by Ufadhili Trust to deliver a 2 day workshop on CSR in Nairobi, Kenya. As I was last in Kenya 20 years ago when I attended an AIESEC African Leadership Development Seminar, it was wonderful to return and compare my impressions.

The biggest changes have been political. In 1990, Daniel Arap Moi was still president (from 1978 to 2002) and ruled a one-party state with an iron hand. My impression back then was of relative stability, but no great sense of prosperity or advancement. I recall that the hotel we stayed at on the coast in Mombasa had a water-cut and the security guard carried a bow and arrow. Also, it took 9 hours to drive the 440 km of pot-hole ridden road between Nairobi and Mombasa.

Today, Kenya has a multi-party democracy under President Mwai Kibaki, although the disputed 2007 general election (and post-election violence) has led to a coalition government in which Raila Odinga shares power as Prime Minister. Apart from changes in politics, the economy is stronger (despite unemployment estimated at 40%) and the roads are noticeably improved.

In fact, the roads sparked one of the first lively debates in the workshop. Why? Because they are built by Chinese contractors. The "Chinese in Africa" topic is a real hot potato, and fascinating from a CSR perspective. The Chinese are bringing massive business investment to Africa (especially in infrastructure), but at what cost? They are accused of low labour, ethical and environmental standards, as well as taking away local employment.

I don't fully buy the "evil China" story (and I fear a new xenophobia is taking hold around the world), for a number of reasons. First, I would far rather see investment in infrastructure than development aid going to Africa. Second, the Chinese government is starting to show concern about its tarnished reputation abroad, so I expect pressure and standards to rise in the coming decade. And third, the Chinese are not all about low costs and poor standards. They have an incredible work ethic and high productivity level, which I believe introduces healthy competition and challenges attitudes of entitlement in countries like Kenya.

The other theme that emerged strongly in the workshop was corruption, although there was less "fight" in this debate. I almost sensed a feeling of resignation among most of

the participants. How do you fight a disease that - like cancer - is so endemic in government, business and society at all levels?

One refreshing voice in this debate was Ken Njiru, Executive Director of Uungwana Resource Institute and one of the leading proponents of business ethics in Kenya. He believes that corruption needs to be branded in the public and business consciousness as "ushenzi", which means "barbaric", "primitive" or "backward". This is contrasted with "uungwana", which means "civilised" or "advanced" or "righteous". (See my video interview with Ken)

As far as general CSR goes, Kenya is still mostly stuck in the PR/philanthropy mode. However, there are inspiring examples of CSR 2.0 practice, such as Vodafone/Safaricom's M-PESA scheme, which allows the unbanked to transfer money by mobile phone text. Similarly, Equity Bank, which has successfully targeted the poorest sectors of society and now, with 4.1 million accounts, makes up over 52% of all bank accounts in Kenya.

I look forward to watching how Kenya can continue to develop and inspire, both within Africa and the world, as it takes its CSR agenda forward. Thank you to Director Mumo Kivuitu and everyone at Ufadhili. (See my video interview with Mumo), Keep up the great work!

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