12 Community Learning in the Indian Education Sector

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12.1 Introduction to the model

In India, the concept of CSR has been mostly confined to the realms of employee welfare. Industrial firms like the Tatas and the Birlas have played pioneering roles in taking care of their employees—building residential colonies, schools, hospitals and temples. This was in the early part of the twentieth century. The Tatas worked on community building (through integrated townships and self-employment schemes) while the Birlas focused on building educational institutions for primary and secondary schooling. However, the focus of the rest of the business community did not change much until the last decade. Liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 brought in a flood of multinationals. Concepts like CSR became more important. After 2000, CSR started making it to the covers of business magazines and an awareness of how CSR can be strategically important to companies started to grow. Part of the credit goes to extensive research carried out by NGOs, often funded by multilateral agencies like the UN. Going beyond random philanthropy, companies started to look at areas where they could contribute significantly to the social development process in a long-term and sustainable way. Various models have been adopted to link company business with existing programmes. The country’s emerging IT giants are taking a lead in the effort. Infosys, Wipro, Tata Consultancy Services are some of the top IT players. All of them have focused on CSR and on education in particular. Being in the knowledge industry, education may have been their obvious choice. To understand the decision process underlying most of the strategic CSR initiatives, it may help to look at a typical model (see Figure 12.1).

12.2 The essence of the model

Companies first identify areas where they can contribute knowledge and expertise. This is a paradigm shift from earlier trends of allocating a percentage of total revenue to schools, hospitals or community development. Based on knowledge
resources, companies are able to focus on areas where they have competence. Often these areas help to improve the competitive context of the company. Dialogue with stakeholders identifies the methodology and review mechanisms. Here communication plays a vital role to keep stakeholders informed of the company’s current activities and future plans. Done in isolation, CSR projects become the corporate showpieces with little long-term value. The Indian experience shows many innovative initiatives that have failed to take off to the next level. In this model, periodic review and defining guidelines are of critical importance to give momentum to the project. However, it is the last step in the process that is the most challenging: how to make the project stand on its own, i.e. can there be a viable revenue model? Indian banks have often looked at bad debts from farmers as part of the social cost of operation. It took a Grameen bank in Bangladesh to change the model and make micro-financing a viable business. In CSR project management, this is a big challenge. Once a CSR initiative starts generating revenue for itself, companies need to delegate operations and look for the next project. Maybe they can identify new areas (geographical or functional) where their expertise and experience can add value.

Chevron is training Nigerian youth in technical skills relevant to the oil and petroleum industry. It is trying to achieve hundred percent indigenous procurement for its oil projects in the Niger Delta. For the community, in the short term, this means increased literacy rates leading to better jobs and better quality of life. In the long term, technical competence also brings in more equitable regional de-