

# A CSR Initiative with Implications on the Learning Experiences of Students in a Deprived Area in Mauritius

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**Abstract:** This small scale study investigates how a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative to extend financial support to a pre-primary school in a deprived area influences the learning experiences of the students in Mauritius. Mauritius is a developing island and like most island states is vulnerable to global forces. Consequently, there is now a call for further partnership between private and public sectors to address developmental issues such as education. Using a qualitative approach, the authors gathered data from teachers (n=6) working in a pre-primary school. The content of the interview were then analysed and emergent themes were obtained. Findings overwhelmingly revealed that this CSR initiative has positively transformed the learning experiences of students. Yet the authors called for even more interventions from CSR companies as data revealed that there remained still more to be done.

**Keywords:** CSR, learning experiences, deprived area

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In Mauritius, CSR is mandatory for companies and education is free. There is nevertheless a call for government to encourage the private sector to extend its support to non-government organisations (NGOs) which are involved in reducing educational poverty and hence empower the poor with capabilities to lead a better life. There has been for some time now, lots of emphasis on actions to democratise the economy and to eradicate absolute poverty. In fact in the Budget Speech, 2015, a Marshall Plan Against Poverty managed by the CSR Committee has been set up in yet another attempt to combat poverty. Today companies are asked through their CSR to ‘take under their wings those unsustainable pockets of poverty in our country’ [1]. CSR would sponsor development in these areas including those involved in reducing educational poverty. At the same time, it is useful for companies through their CSR to try to retain public’s confidence in them.

CSR has as one of its dominant goal to improve the conditions of various stakeholders [2]. It is also there to help the government to meet its objectives [3]. While CSR is not a new concept, it is still considered as buzz word for many people even though a lot has already been written on that issue [4] Furthermore, CSR is seen as a continuous process of engagement of the firm with the stakeholder [5]. At the same time it should be remembered that there is increasing pressure on firms to take their social responsibilities that they have increased their CSR investment [6]. At the same time, the benefits from CSR cannot be ignored [7]. Another important element of CSR is that it covers a wide array of activities and hence is described as an ‘umbrella term’ [8].

In the Budget speech of 2009, it was announced that companies have to spend 2 percent of their profits on CSR or else they had to transfer that amount to government to be used for projects which will help reduce poverty and protect the environment. CSR was considered as an important means to help government in its plan to improve the conditions of living of the most vulnerable as it seen that despite the fact that the government had poverty alleviation programmes “there seems to be no systematic monitoring and evaluation to assess to what extent these programmes are helping the poor to integrate mainstream society” [9]. Companies used to be governed by very strict rules concerning allocation of

funds from CSR. Yet in the budget speech of 2015, these rules were abolished and companies are now free to decide how they are to allocate their CSR funds.

Another important element in this study is that in Mauritius education is free and compulsory from the age of 3 to 16. The students start pre-primary school at 3, spend two years there before moving to primary school at the age of 5. They spend 6 years in primary and take part in a national examination. Those who succeed move to secondary school. After 5 years they have the Cambridge ordinary level examinations and then two years later they have the Cambridge higher school certificate. There are no tuition fees for those who attend University of Mauritius. However, the government allows private individuals and organisations to operate schools in either pre-primary, primary, secondary or tertiary sectors. This has led to the mushrooming of both profit making and non profit-making institutions. The non-profit making institutions are mainly non governmental organisations which are involved in poverty reduction.

## II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

One area which has always attracted attention in the various fights against poverty is education. In the last Budget speech [1] the government identifies 38 pockets of poverty which involved 5478 families. These people are living in very difficult conditions. This study aims at investigating how CSR funds transform the educational experiences of deprived children in one of these regions where a non-government organisation has set up a pre-primary school.

## III. RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the learning experiences of students attending a pre-primary school in a deprived area which is sponsored by CSR funds?

## IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature on CSR seems to indicate that there is no strict definition of CSR but has been somehow freely defined. As noted “CSR means something, but not always the same thing to everybody” [10]. It is a contested concept [11]. This has led to the fact that “The moral underpinnings of CSR are neither clear nor agree upon [12], while it has been noted that “we have looked for a definition and basically there isn’t one”[13]. Yet, CSR has been described as the ‘latest management fad’ [14]. Companies and society are interwoven and therefore it gives rise to CSR because society has certain expectations for appropriate business behaviours and outcomes [15]. Furthermore, it was found that the engagement of companies in CSR can be seen like any investment in a business venture which ultimate aim is to contribute to the profit-making of the firm [6]

In fact, CSR has been defined as “a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment” [16]. It has also been defined as “voluntary commitment to address the ethical, social and environmental factors associated with all aspects of its operations”[17]. It is claimed that CSR can be defined “as a set of management practices that ensure the company minimises the negative impacts of its operations on society while maximising its positive impacts” [18].

In the early days of CSR, companies were accountable to society [19]. Organisations hold a societal contract with society. In fact it was claimed that those companies which do not operate in line with societal values will in the long run lose their legitimacy to exist and will not survive. Hence companies have CSR out of a sense of duty to be a good citizen [20]. Additionally, it was also claimed that CSR gives companies a “license to operate” [21]. It also attempts to provide benefits to the society to which it belongs [22].

Apart from obtaining organisational legitimacy, CSR is relevant to companies which want committed and dedicated employees. It was found that employees expect that their companies engage in CSR [6]. Furthermore, other studies reveal that employees develop better work attitudes, greater productivity and less turnover [23],[24]. The combined impact of CSR and employees’ commitment help to reinforce desirable behaviour and this can make a major contribution in creating long term success of the companies.

Strongly linked with the previous argument is also the ethical dimension of CSR. Leaders of companies have to weigh the moral and ethical consequences of the choices they make [25]. Companies are no longer in business only to make profits as claimed that “there is only one responsibility of business namely to use its resources and engage in activities designed

to increase its profits” [26]. They need to show that they are giving due consideration to ethics as well. It shows that they care for the larger public and do not have a box-ticking mentality [27].

It is a fact that companies are in business to grow and make profits. It is claimed that CSR allows a company to enjoy financial rewards [28]. It is believed that as companies engage in CSR, it improves the companies’ corporate image and thereby improves their financial performance [29],[30],[31]. Moreover, as these companies communicate their CSR activities, they manage to change the perceptions of key stakeholders, to convey the companies’ values to the public, to establish the companies’ activities in line with social norms.

Furthermore, CSR is also seen as a means for a company to improve its reputation and branding [19]. In fact it forces companies to focus on finding sensible ways to communicate that they are a company which cares for others. Good reputation provides a better coverage by stock analysis and acts a vital bargaining tool with external stakeholders while at the same time providing a more saleable brand. CSR can even help companies avoid boycotts and increase consumer loyalty [32]. It was found that “ consumers have developed favourable attitudes toward ethical products and companies with socially responsible practices” [33].

Companies also get access to more funds if they have a CSR [34]. When investors notice that the companies have a CSR, they tend to be more willing to invest their money in these companies. These companies also get more favourable ratings from financial institutions.

CSR also allows companies to reduce different kinds of business risks such as government regulations, labour unrest or environmental damage [35]. It is seen that in many cases, the fact that the companies are engaged in CSR help stakeholders to have a different view of the companies. They try to be good corporate citizen. It is claimed that organisations “contribute resources to the community, improve the quality of life” [36]. Furthermore, we can also refer to the claim that “companies are responsible to society as a whole, of which they are an integral part” [37].

Hence when we review the reasons why companies get engaged in CSR, we find that they follow an established framework that companies firstly face their economic responsibilities, then their legal ones, followed by their ethical responsibilities and lastly their philanthropic ones [36]. These are the main categories under which we can categorise the actions of companies. They are the main drivers which guide the decisions of companies.

## V. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research method is used for this study as we want to gain a deeper understanding of a problem [38]. Data is collected from five teachers who are employed in a particular pre-primary school which has been founded by a non-government organisation in a deprived area. This school welcomes sixty students from an area which forms part of the pocket of poverty identified by the government. The school offers breakfast, lunch and snacks to all the students as well as all the materials which the students need at school. It obtains funds from CSR of various companies. These teachers will be interviewed as these have allowed the authors to gather information regarding their experiences and knowledge [39]. The interviews have been analysed and emergent themes sought.

The whole issue of poverty alleviation and CSR donation are very sensitive issues. Hence the head of school was informed and authorisation was obtained to conduct the research. Then informed consent of participants were sought. The objective of the research was explained to them and they were also informed that their participation was voluntary. Furthermore, the participants were told that no risks and dangers were involved as a consequence of their participation.

## VI. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following are the emergent themes which have been found:

### ***Reporting of having access to CSR funds:***

Participants revealed that reporting that they are having access to CSR funds has “greatly helped in securing additional funding”. One participant noted that other companies “inquired about our projects”. Hence because they were already getting access to CSR funding, they also got other companies to provide them with funds, equipment and other facilities. It is seen there that as a result of having CSR funding, the non-government organisation was able to provide a better learning experience to those children under its care. There is no denying the enthusiasm that these participants expressed

in their voice when they talked about the interest that other companies expressed for their initiative and how their contribution has helped them to provide children with “neat playing grounds”, “new playground equipment”, “new educational games” and “better indoors facilities”. One participant indicated that “reporting and communicating that we are benefiting from CSR is very important. We report mainly in newspaper, the website and in our annual report for those outside the organisation. This helps to bring in more funds”. It is found that companies get additional funds if they have CSR and this is also true for beneficiaries [34]. This implies that students’ learning experiences are improved since additional means are available.

#### ***Survival:***

Participants explained that the whole initiative is funded from CSR funds of various companies. As noted by one participant “when we first started, we did not have much”. They also explained that although their objective was to provide children with a different kind of learning experience, they were “struggling to make ends meet” and provided the “bare minimum to the children”. However, as CSR funding started to come in their financial situation improved and they were able to invest in “new equipment”, “uplifting of grounds”, “interior renovation works” and the purchase of pedagogical materials. One participant indicated that “without CSR funding, we would not have been able to go on. We would have closed down long ago”. Another participant explained that “people expect more from a NGO. In turn we tend to expect a lot from CSR!”. Hence, we find that as a result of CSR funding, this NGO has been able to continue providing improved service to the children, thereby transforming their learning experience since they got access to better facilities at school and to that particular school which is providing facilities that many other pre-primary schools do not. Hence these organisations manage to transform the learning experiences of students because they continue to exist due to CSR. This is in line with what was found as a benefit of CSR [20].

#### ***Transformed working experience:***

One participant explained that because they have CSR funding they are able to provide a lot of facilities for the children. This helped the teachers to do their job with a lot of satisfaction. They got access to a wide array of pedagogical materials. They worked in a pleasant environment. Another participant noted that they “felt strongly motivated”. They felt fully dedicated and committed and ready to give their best. There is a strong feeling that because of the facilities which they enjoyed and which are funded from CSR, teachers are more motivated. One participant explained that “we must not forget that we form part of the community, we work with and for the community. We must not say that we are already doing more than enough for the community”. CSR funding has created attractive workplace to retain the employees and to increase their dedication. They felt that “this is the right thing to do for these children”. Participants explained that they feel even more motivated when they realised that some companies were “opting to maintain social involvement in their school even if it entailed net costs for them”. Consequently, we find that teachers appreciate the fact that companies take on the additional costs to continuing sponsoring the school at the expense of their shareholders’ personal wealth. Additionally, we have a highly motivated staff. This we believe will positively impact on the learning experiences of children. Employees are more motivated and we can see how it influences the learning experiences of students. CSR companies also tend to have more motivated employees [22].

#### ***Responsibility towards society:***

Participants explained that as a result of CSR funding they are able to provide students with a different learning experience. They feel that it is important for the children of that region to enjoy such facilities. The teachers explained that although some parents are trying hard to provide their children with basic necessities, this is not the case for others. Hence the children tend to grow up in “very harsh conditions”. When these children come to school and enjoy the services which the school can provide because of CSR funds, these children feel “cared” and “valued”. They, in turn “rush to come to school”. Some children even “cry when they have to go home”. One participant noted that “on Monday mornings, they are here as from 7 am while school only starts at 9am!”. The children are “eager to learn”. The facilities available at school greatly help to make learning fun and captivating for them. Hence CSR allows a company to take care of society and to provide a different learning experience to students [19].

#### ***High attendance:***

Typical comments were made on the fact that it is common in those deprived areas for children to miss school. Yet the participants also noted that in their school, the students are regularly present. They seem to like “coming to school”. Two

participants noted that the students seem to find school “interesting”. One participant explained that because of CSR funding they were able to offer a service of better quality to the students. It was also noted that this led to an increase in best practices for the students in terms of discipline, hygiene and greater enthusiasm to come to school. Hence students were able to be “better prepared, more confident and with enhanced skills to embark on their primary education”. Additionally, it was found that providing students with an enhanced learning experience at pre-primary was important to given them a better chance at primary. They have a school which just like the organisation is a caring organisation [37]. It has been able to positively influence and benefit the community within which it operates [22].

#### ***Care for the holistic development of the students:***

Participants explained that they were able to employ qualified personnel. Furthermore teachers were provided with continuous professional development. At the same time the children were taught using the play based approach. The children were encouraged to express themselves in fun activities such as drama, painting, gardening, singing and drawing. The school was also able to provide physical education classes. Moreover, one participant explained that the school was also able to employ speech therapists and psychologists to attend to the needs of the learners. Hence, as a result of CSR funding, the school has been able to extend the range of services which it offers to the students. At the same time, the way the students learn leads to their holistic development. Somehow this can be compared to increasing consumer loyalty [20].

#### ***Small sized classes:***

The participants explained that they work with small sized classes. They explained that they would have taught with the same dedication and commitment if they had more students in class but they highlighted that with a smaller class size, they can better attend to the individual needs of the learners. The participants indicated that there are benefits for the students if they are taught in smaller classes. This is even more important in the formative years. The participants explained that they could complete the programme more quickly. This allowed them ‘time to teach additional materials’. They could go for “in depth teaching”. Additionally, they explained that they were able to make more effective use of learning corners [23].

#### ***Teaching:***

Participants explained that they are “deeply touched” by the initiative of the NGO. They realised that without CSR they would not have been able to work in such conditions. Hence they are very enthusiastic about their job. They also talked about developing positive attitudes towards the students. They recognised the students’ efforts and success with praise. They also explained that they promoted learning by providing “individualised attention” to students and tried to ‘motivate them’. One participant explained how she “engaged” a student through a wide array of creative activities. Another participant also explained that he set and communicated high expectations for students. At the same time another participant explained that they kept the lines of communication open with the parents. This helps to increase the company’s corporate image [36].

#### ***Planning teaching and learning:***

Participants explained that because they have more space and that they have considerable teaching materials, they are able to match the individual students’ needs. They can also allocate the instructional time more effectively. The techniques and methods used are directed towards the students and can “be tailor-made” to suit the needs of the learners. At the same time, because of the facilities offered by the school, teachers are able to have “more sustained interaction” with students. They can ask more questions and probe more deeply. They can also provide the students with more constructive feedback. One participant noted that there are less discipline problems. Hence teachers spend less time taking care of housekeeping issues. They indicated that all these facilities which are available greatly helped them to develop a “richer and more productive learning environment”. One participant explained that given the resources available they were able to transform students’ learning experience and turn it into more than “plug and play”. Consequently, teachers can be dedicated employees and the school a good citizen [20].

#### ***Know their students better:***

Participants explained that because of the structure of the class they got to know their students better on the academic side as well as their personalities. They were also better able to follow the progress of the students. They could provide more individualised feedback and provide more encouragement and praise to students. They could also more easily challenge

the students and help them to put in more efforts. Additionally because of one to one situations, the teachers were able to provide individualised attention. There were more ‘one-to-one’ communications and exchanges. The participants also explained that they were able to have small groups in class. Groupings allow the teacher to deal with each group. In turn students developed their social skills. They learn at a very early age to negotiate with their friends. They also got to deal with conflicts in a very constructive way. There is a caring institution which can propose a different learning experience [27].

***Easier to teach:***

Participants explained that because of the fact that there were only twenty students in a class, the students were “less noisy”, “less chaotic” and there were less pushing and bullying. The atmosphere in the classroom was described as “more relaxed” and “happier”. Students also tended to be more inclined to help each other and be “nice” to each other. The students were able to actively participate in class and the teachers find it more “interesting” to prepare lessons. They also explained that they can go beyond what is required in class and help students to “expand their knowledge”. Thereby developing brand loyalty [20].

These are the main themes which have emerged from the analysis of the interviews conducted at school with the teachers. Though it is a small scale study, it nevertheless brings interesting insights in the allocation and implications of CSR funds.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings above, the following are recommended:

***More involvement from the CSR companies:***

All the beneficiaries of CSR funds have to file in documents to report on their actions. However, CSR companies could get even more involved in these projects. They could encourage their employees to take part on these initiatives. This might be beneficial for both the companies and for the non-government organisations. The former will have more devoted employees as employees care more about working for a company which has strong values than its bottom line. The latter will get more human resources to support its projects.

***More commitment to CSR:***

Since CSR funding is so important for NGOs, there should be more commitment to CSR at the highest level of corporate management. Companies could align their CSR policies with best standards as well as integrate social responsibilities into core business corporations. Companies could have fully qualified people to work on their CSR policies so as to ensure that the best use is made of CSR funds as CSR funding has major implications for society in general.

***CSR and clients:***

Companies should consider better relations with clients as a benefit from conducting CSR. As clients come to know how CSR funding is impacting on the lives of marginalised children from deprived areas, this can help clients to make up their minds instead of shopping around. Companies can use their CSR tag to attract and retain clients. They should advertise the fact that they are engaged in social initiatives to build up and consolidate their relationship with their clients. As they get more clients, their CSR activities can expand. This will create a ripple effect on society and those who rely on social help.

***CSR appraisal:***

Companies which engage in CSR activities should conduct regular appraisal in order to determine the full implications of their funding. Although beneficiaries file in documents, companies should request more than that. They need to document the impact of their CSR funding and train their staff to be on the lookout for educational projects which have domino effects on derived areas and society.

***Internal guidelines:***

NGOs could advocate for companies to have a CSR policy which is more versed towards certain initiatives. CSR funds and efforts could be invested in community development projects and people centric activities with emphasis on rural,

weaker and poorer sections of society in deprived areas. More attentions could be given to addressing the socio-economic development challenges of the society and to try to reduce educational poverty.

***Educational CSR:***

In many case companies providing CSR funding could analyse and reflect on all the implications of providing educational CSR. When CSR funds are directed to educational projects the organisations may find it difficult to take stock of all the different implications. CSR could analyse the impacts of educational projects in more concrete terms and hence rationalise the allocation of CSR funds towards those educational CSR which make the most impact on society

***Measurement:***

Companies could be encouraged to measure the full impact of their educational sponsoring. There is need to know how the CSR would change the situation. Although many would argue that the output of educational CSR in monetary terms might be difficult to find, then they should find other ways to measure the impacts.

***Additional support:***

Many organisations providing CSR do much more than just sign and send cheques to sponsor projects and request information dictated by CSR regulations. Organisations could be encouraged to provide additional support. They could investigate how they could develop the sponsoring more effectively. They could give to those educational projects a new dimension by bringing in more resources.

***Setting standards:***

Organisations providing CSR funds for educational projects could set standards for others to follow. They could provide CSR in such a way that would encourage others to follow suit. The way they provide CSR funds could be used as benchmarking for other organisations. This could provide the CSR business with standards and be more effective in giving out CSR funds so that they can be more ready to fight educational poverty.

***Policymakers could provide rewards:***

Although there are guidelines for awarding CSR funds and organisations receive many direct advantages from giving CSR, an additional benefit could be provided to organisations by policy makers in the form of formal rewards. These rewards could be used to encourage other companies to invest to reduce education poverty. These rewards would provide more recognition to organisations and increase their reputation and enhance their corporate image. This would improve the company's brand. They could be seen as caring company.

## VIII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is to be noted that companies have started their CSR initiatives by indulging in philanthropic activities. Overtime their approach has changed and has been more structured in the corporate strategy of companies. This is important for NGOs which rely heavily on CSR funding because it not only ensures their survival but gives an additional dimension to their initiatives. In this case CSR has helped transformed the learning experiences of children in a deprived area despite the constraints imposed by CSR regulations. It is hoped that companies would continue their CSR initiatives or engage in new activities in the future and that none would curtail or cease their CSR activities as CSR funding goes a long way to transform the lives of those who benefit from them.

CSR is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. It is designed to facilitate and enable the good funding of NGOs. CSR engagement of companies goes beyond mandatory requirements. We have to realise that CSR is only a viable component of a business strategy along with such functions as marketing and human resources, but it is a vital source of funds for NGOs to fulfil their mandates. Hence the funding of projects designed by NGOs. In fact we can say that CSR funding has a multiplier effect which goes beyond the boundaries of the companies. There are numerous implications for those in deprived areas and for society in general.

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