

How Vodacom is adapting its CSI approach to changing conditions

Rather than doggedly following an approach which may no longer be relevant, business has an obligation to adapt its corporate social investment (CSI) to changing needs and conditions. Speaking at the 2019 Trialogue Business in Society Conference in Johannesburg on Wednesday, 17 April, Takalani Netshitenzhe, chief officer corporate affairs, Vodacom Group, said that Vodacom has allocated R500m to education, gender empowerment and sanitation in schools over the next five years.



Takalani Netshitenzhe, chief officer corporate affairs, Vodacom Group

Netshitenzhe said that while Vodacom has pursued its Connect For Good initiative for 25 years and given 3,000 schools access to e-learning in the last 10 years, Vodacom's CSI efforts must, like any effective strategy, be adaptable to change.

ICT footprint

In 2017 the company conducted a high-level analysis of its ICT footprint and the extent to which it addressed the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. "We realised we can't make an impact on all 17 SDGs, so we selected seven of the 17 to drive our business strategy. We then streamlined activities in accordance with this and, to have a better impact, the Vodacom Foundation focuses on two main streams, education and gender empowerment."

As part of consolidating its education portfolio, Vodacom introduced early childhood development (ECD) into its education programme, focusing on 15 ECD centres across the country, and has also adopted one in Midrand where its head office is located. It has worked to bring about the eradication of pit latrines and to consolidate ECD initiatives.

"We've taken this decision because it's important for businesses to invest in CSI where they're based. We want to develop an education ecosystem in Midrand and have identified 12 schools across the country, which we've named Schools of Excellence, which have computer labs. It's important that kids get used to using technology and using computers.

"We committed, with the Nelson Mandela Foundation and Global Citizen, to ensuring schools have decent ablution facilities. Even though bricks and mortar aren't our area of expertise, we need to be sure those attending the schools have dignity."

The ECD centres and schools of excellence will, with the teachers' centres that Vodacom has established, effectively create a pipeline for nurturing talent and preparing them for the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Addressing gender-based violence

The company has also established a command centre for gender-based violence (GBV), where survivors receive valuable IT skills training. When the BBBEE ICT Sector Codes came into effect Vodacom had to decide whether to continue supporting the NPOs that are not ICT oriented in order not to lose BBBEE points. "We decided not to exit the NPOs but to migrate them to our gender empowerment stream and today we are now supporting them with ICTs and digital literacy."

Last year Vodacom started a partnership with the United Nations and SAWIF (South African Women in Farming) and developed the Connect the Farmer app, which connects women farmers across the agricultural value chain. Many of the

women were digitally illiterate so Vodacom provided them with computer literacy training. “Now they’re setting up email addresses, building websites and business plans.”

Netshitenzhe says Vodacom encourages employees to give back to the communities they live in, and for the beneficiaries of its CSI investment to tell their own stories, both of which can be a powerful tool for social cohesion and employee well-being.

“There is nothing as powerful as looking at the face of someone whose life you have touched.”

She added that in the current sluggish economic growth, “companies are tightening their belts but they cannot do away with CSI. Instead they need to be creative and integrate it in all aspects of business and ensure it is included in strategies.”

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