

Education initiatives can transform CSI into social justice

By [Dion Reddy](#)

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Despite corporate social investment (CSI) activities becoming more common among South African businesses in recent years, they're still seldom treated as little more than a box-ticking exercise.



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Instead, they're often driven by compliance obligations, outlined by the BEE Scorecard, and the vague need to maintain a social licence to operate. They're rarely strategic, rarely aligned with business objectives or the specific needs of communities, and rarely effective in the long-term.

As South Africa rallies around Nelson Mandela Day on 18 July – and Nelson Mandela Month more generally – we need our corporates to rethink how they approach and respond to CSI. These activities need to be less about compliance and more about effecting sustainable socio-economic change that benefits society and businesses alike. The pivot – from CSI to social justice – is more important than ever before.

Reimagining CSI

The form that social justice projects take must depend on the needs of both the community and the business concerned. Ideally, they should be as localised as possible. Offering opportunities away from community members' place of residence tears the fabric of families and groups, separating parents from their children, dissolving heritage, tradition and language, and exposing individuals to the crime and poverty so often found in South Africa's overpopulated cities.

Local, grassroots projects, on the other hand, demonstrate a commitment to addressing community-specific needs and maintaining social cohesion. The corresponding benefits of this for business are equally tangible.

Businesses that truly invest in their employees and their surrounding communities by implementing long-term projects that have been developed in close collaboration with these groups reap long-term rewards. They stay in business longer, outlasting their competitors, and garner sustainable support by ensuring their communities are respected and heard.



Educate, train, develop

In this space, education, training and personal development initiatives – both among employees and community members – has gained widespread traction, and with good reason. "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world," Mandela, whose belief in the power of education was unflinching, once said.



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Many of the projects that Media Works runs in KwaZulu-Natal involve literacy, numeracy and work-readiness components, equipping adults with the tools they need to find and secure employment. Of the 54 community members we trained in the province in 2018, more than 25% were employed within a six- to 12-months period. Media Works also prioritises the implementation of its Accelerate Pro-learning programme, which uses advanced and effective learning practices, together with easy-to-use technology, to educate and empower adults.

Upskilling and training employees makes them better equipped to perform their jobs and gives them the means to excel and proceed through the ranks both within businesses and between businesses. Upskilling and training community members restore dignity to people whose educational history was either non-existent or defunct and fosters loyalty in labour-sending areas. The ripple effect of this sort of investment is far-reaching: as one person learns to read, write, acquire a skill and gain employment, they're more likely to educate their children, and their children's children in turn, so breaking deep cycles of poverty and improving businesses' access to a wider network of skilled employees.



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The result is the creation of efficient, effective, well-loved and sustainable organisations, and also the elimination of social and economic inequalities. In a word: the achievement of social justice.

Social justice projects need to address all manner of ills, including not only educational gaps for children and adults alike, but also the provision of healthcare, water and sanitation, and access to technology. The leap between these being bottom-up social justice projects versus top-down CSI projects comes down to communication and collaboration. They need to be guided by community members, traditional councils and local NGOs, rather than merely dictated by poorly informed corporates. By adopting this approach, long-term sustainability for businesses and the creation of socially and economically healthy societies is possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dion Reddy is the Managing Director of Media Works KwaZulu-Natal. Media Works, which is part of the FutureLearn group, is one of South Africa's leading adult education and training providers.

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