HIV/AIDS AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

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Abstract: India is experiencing a period of high economic growth and rapid social and demographic change. There is increasing concern about the manner this transformation is impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. While the Government of India has taken significant measures to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, much remains to be done. Given the complexity of the challenge, an effective response requires the engagement of all sectors. The private-sector, alongside other stakeholders, can play an important part not only by contributing to the efforts for HIV/AIDS prevention and the reduction of stigma and discrimination, but also for the care, support and treatment of Persons Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA). In India, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts to create new inclusive and sustainable business models have become intrinsic to growth and development as well as a global challenge.

Key Words: HIV/AIDS, Corporate Social Responsibility, the private-sector, India, PLHA, sustainable business.

INTRODUCTION:

AIDS (Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome) is the life threatening disease caused by HIV (Human Immuno Deficiency Virus) that weakens the body's immune system, making it difficult for the body to resist bacteria and viruses that causes disease. It is primarily spread through blood and body fluid and most importantly, it spreads through basic human urge i.e. sexual practice. Women and adults are most affected by this epidemic across the globe. An attempt has been made in this study to highlight the involvement of the corporate sector in the response to HIV/AIDS is crucial to the success of any country's efforts against the epidemic. Businesses can mobilize support in various sectors, give enhanced visibility to the campaign to help keep HIV/AIDS on the national agenda, and engender a holistic robust civil society response. More and more corporate bodies are now recognizing the potential economic impact of the epidemic, as a holistic response is offered through public-private partnership.

CSR as a Concept:

There is little consensus on the definition of Corporate Social Responsibility; however, most definitions describe CSR as a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interactions with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis. The “Karmayog CSR Study and Ratings of Indian Companies” states that CSR is about two aspects:

1. “The steps taken by the company to neutralize, minimize, or offset the negative effects caused by its processes and product-usage”.
2. “The further positive steps a company takes using its resources, core competence, skills, location, and funds for the benefit of people and environment” (Karmayog, 2009).

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development defines CSR as “the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large” (Collage Article 13, 2007).

Why Corporate Social Responsibility:

Business worldwide have found that the most important spur to developing their own HIV and AIDS Programs has been the impact of the disease on their bottom line.
Numerous studies from Kenya and South Africa conducted by companies such as Daimler Chrysler and De Beers have shown that direct business action in preventing and treating HIV & AIDS cases ensures benefits that influence the company balance sheet and protect their greatest resource: their people. The productivity of workers who are living with HIV and who are not on medication invariably falls over time, and these workers are forced to take sick leave and in most cases leave their work permanently (Mitra 2006).

Linkage between HIV/AIDS & Corporate Social Responsibility:

Business for Social Responsibilities (BSR) defines Corporate Social Responsibility as “achieving commercial success in ways that honors ethical values and respect people, communities and natural environment”. We also say that CSR means addressing the legal, ethical, and social expectations society has for business and making decisions that fairly balance the claims of the key stakeholders. In its simplest terms it is “What you do, how you do it, and when and what you say”. Underlining the economic cost of the epidemic, the then Chairman of the National Business Alliance on HIV/AIDS (NBA) Hadi S. Topobroto said at the opening ceremony of the Asia-Pacific HIV/AIDS Private Sector Mobilization in Indonesia, a country where 15 percent of the population is living with HIV/AIDS would suffer a one percent decrease in GDP per year. Therefore, employers and company owners have the responsibility to protect their workers from the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic”. Therefore the corporate social responsibility efforts against HIV/AIDS are on the rise.

Approaches:

Relationship between society and corporate sectors is interwoven that both have certain duties and responsibilities towards each other. Approaches which have been outlined below are results of new perspectives in understanding the relationship among society, industry and government as partners of development having mutual concerns for one another.

The Asia-Pacific faces a “Silent Tsunami” as HIV/AIDS rates surge in a region home to more than half the world’s population, said by a UN official. Despite the fact that 99 percent of Asians don’t have the virus, in 2007 this region posted the world’s second highest infection rate after sub-Saharan Africa, said JVR Prasad Rao, Regional Director of the UNAIDS support team for Asia and the Pacific. The disease is also attacking women, who account for 40 percent of the cases in Asia, a region so massive that percentages measuring national infection rates often are useless in telling the real story of the millions who are living with the disease, said Dr. Shigeru Omi, the World Health Organization’s Western Pacific Regional Director.

(can you imagine that every day 1,500 people are dying?” he told the Press that “It’s a huge number, and 3,500 are newly infected everyday.

The virus is also circulating beyond certain population in Asia – such as injecting drug users and prostitutes and moving more steadily into the general population. For instance, an injecting drug user could also visit a sex worker and then go home to a wife who could contract the disease unknowingly and transmit it to an unborn child. It is that kind of overlap that’s fueling an HIV/AIDS explosion in the Asia-Pacific region that will lead to another 12 million infections over the next five years if the disease is left unchecked, UNAIDS has warned. Mr. Rao of UNAIDS stressed that prevention programmes must be expanded to target groups with spiking infection rates. Out of 16 Asian countries a study found that only 1 percent of men who have sex with men had been reached with HIV/AIDS messages and only 5 percent of injecting drug users.

UNAIDS’S programme features “HIV & YOU”, an innovative programme targeted at raising awareness of HIV among migrant workers and communities through the involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). The programme also aims at mobilizing the support of the private sector and promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the region.

“HIV & YOU”, developed and facilitated by the UNDP Regional HIV and Development Programme, South and North
East Asia, in partnership with the Indian Network for People Living with HIV (INP+), acquires particular significance in Asia Pacific because the region witnesses large scale migration of people. Poverty, diminishing choices, denial of nights and lack of access to information and services make migrant populations particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. This initiative is an effort to address it through innovative partnerships.

The key partners in this effort are various groups of people working with large, medium and small scale industries, particularly migrant and contractual labourers and their communities; the corporate sector; and people living with HIV/AIDS. The key objective is to reach out, not only to the mainstream industrial workforce populations, which are primarily migrants, in these industries, but also to populations that are peripheral to the industry, such as contract labourers, truck drivers and suppliers.

A critical aspect of the initiative is that it provides a platform for operationalization of GIPA (Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS), which calls for meaningful involvement of PLWHA in all aspects of the response to the epidemic, while addressing the needs of migrant industrial workforce populations, which are primarily migrants, in these industries, but also to populations which have hitherto been peripheral to the industry, such as contract labourers, truck drivers and suppliers.

An important lesson learned in addressing the vulnerabilities of people and dealing with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Asia Pacific region, and elsewhere in the world, during the last two decades has been the need for multi-sectoral responses built on partnerships between key stakeholders – governments, media, vulnerable groups such as migrants and sex workers, civil society organizations, international organizations and the corporate sector to name a few.

One of the most important stakeholders in the responses that address the vulnerabilities of workers, their families and communities is the corporate sector. Greater involvement of the corporate sector not only provides a unique opportunity of reaching out to the vulnerable groups, their families and communities through the workplace, but also to safeguard its interest as evidence from various parts of the world shows that the impact on HIV can be severe on it. An equally important learning from the responses has been the need to involve People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in all aspects of the response to the epidemic, particularly prevention and care, reflecting the true spirit behind the principles of GIPA (Greater Involvement of People Living with HIV/AIDS). It has now been widely acknowledged that the immense experience of PLWHA is negotiating with the epidemic and their first hand knowledge can be an extremely vital ingredient to successful responses. Needless to say, it is also an empowering exercise for PLWHA besides opening new avenues of income generation for PLWHA groups. The increased visibility of PLWHA in productive roles also helps to reduce the stigma and discrimination faced by them.

“HIV & YOU” complements other workplace and community based initiatives because it aims to reach out to populations which have hitherto been difficult to reach. The initiative also positions corporate social responsibility of the industrial sectors in the region. The initiative benefits the corporate in more ways than one. It offers a practical and viable method for corporates to get involved in prevention activities without putting excessive load on them either in terms of time or financial resources. What is required is their wholehearted commitment to make the programme successful.

Steps taken by CSR for the prevention of HIV/AIDS:

The role of Corporate Social Responsibility and active involvement of the private sector in the response to HIV/AIDS epidemic has been gaining momentum in the region during the last few years. Some of the global examples of CSR include:

- A Global Business Council on HIV/AIDS was launched in 1997. It is a group of 15 companies advocating a stronger business response to HIV around the world;
- Coca-Cola announced a partnership with UNAIDS to participate in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa;
- The Corporate Council on Africa has formed a Task Force on AIDS in Africa.
- Standard Chartered Bank has initiated a global initiative among its employees;
- Several Indian companies, including Larsen & Toubro, Tata Tea Limited, Aditya Birla Group, Apollo Tyres, Modicare Foundation, SAIL and Bajaj Auto, have also launched preventive efforts. In South Asia, the trend is picking up. There are many encouraging examples of CSR, Public-Private partnerships and the private and corporate sectors demonstrating active roles in prevention, care and support activities. Promoting CSR in HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support initiatives in the Asia Pacific region is one of the objectives of the advocacy and communication efforts of the UNDP Regional HIV and Development Programme. In partnership with other stakeholders and private and corporate sectors, the idea is to create a regional platform for fostering CSR in HIV/AIDS.

SAIL (The Steel Authority of India Limited) has initiated a prevention and control of HIV/AIDS programme titled “SAIL AIDS Control Programme” (SACP) in association with the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO). As part of intersectoral collaboration, SAIL has initiated a multi-pronged programme for implementing the policies and guidelines of NACO in its plants/units townships. SAIL’s major initiatives include:

1) School AIDS Education Programme;
2) Family Health Awareness Campaign;
3) Safe Blood and Blood Products;
4) Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centre (VCTC);
5) World AIDS Day Celebrations;
6) Exhibition and displays;
7) Counseling and guidance with the help of NGOs;
8) Establishing ART Centres.

**Importance of Adherence to HIV/AIDS**

“Drugs don’t work in patients who don’t take them” and in the management of HIV/AIDS it is a well established fact that poor adherence by patients is an important predictor of the outcome of Antiretroviral Therapy (ART). Studies have indicated that at least 95 percent adherence to ART regimen is optimal. Although combination Antiretroviral Therapy is indicated for all infants, children and adolescents, such therapies are still inaccessible to millions of HIV infected population in developing countries.

**Society Sensitization Programmes**

Awareness of HIV/AIDS is still poor in India. Thus, along with cultural differences, taboos and stigma further reduces the acceptance of HIV/AIDS patients in the community. Interventions to improve overall social acceptance of HIV/AIDS and its therapy have become essential for better outcome. Industry’s initiatives such as disease awareness campaigns by means of mass communication activities, multilingual posters, HIV/AIDS patients education books, patient-counseling / help-lines and online information resources are expected to improve awareness of HIV/AIDS.

**CONCLUSION**

Involvement of the private sector in the response to HIV/AIDS is crucial to the success of any country’s efforts against the epidemic. Since HIV/AIDS primarily strikes working age (15-49 years old) members of society of the peak of their economic productivity (UNAIDS Report, 2006) the employers and company owners have the responsibility to protect their workers from the spread of the epidemic. Measures taken to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS, availability and accessibility of patient and patient-friendly kits for adults and children will go a long way in increasing awareness and acceptance of this disease and its therapy.
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