

ASEAN

## A time for CSR to shine

ZHANG WEINA / btnews@sph.com.sg

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Traditionally, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has mainly been at the back seat of firms as a cost item. Perhaps, some firms may think of donations and volunteerism as tools to boost their public image. Or perhaps, some firms use CSR as one of the crisis management strategies to reduce public discontent.

However, there is more to CSR, especially during a crisis period. Notably, CSR can accumulate social capital at firm-level, industry-level, and societal level. This is represented by more motivated and satisfied employees within a firm, more trust and loyalty among the stakeholders of the firm, and better firm reputation in the public's view as a socially responsible business.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many firms have been badly hit. Some firms in ASEAN, however, have stepped up their CSR efforts, building social capital at various levels. Within a firm, taking care of employees' welfare is a direct way to build firm-level social capital.

Some firms such as Singapore Telecommunications, SATS and Comfort DelGro, made commitments to keep their staff, especially their low-wage workers. Gojek from Indonesia stepped up in providing more financial support for their employees who were tested positive for the coronavirus. Some Singapore firms provided high-quality emergency shelters for their foreign employees when Malaysia imposed a lockdown.

Other firms temporarily deployed their idle staff to be re-trained and re-employed by other sectors which are facing surging demand. For example, Singapore Airlines deployed hundreds of cabin crew to be re-trained for to serve as care ambassadors in hospitals and transport ambassadors at public transport hubs.

### People-cum-Private CSR Model in F&B Sector

Across firms, an interesting CSR model has emerged in Singapore that connects the people sector with the private sector. Some F&B businesses have formed a network to raise public donations to continue running their business activities and provide goods and services at low rates for the needy.

For example, Food Bank Singapore started a "Feed The City" programme where donations help to sustain 13 F&B businesses to supply meals for vulnerable groups. Another project is "Project Belanja" started by charity organization Blossom World Society. It has been working with 100 restaurateurs and food chains under Restaurant Association of Singapore to bring nutritious and tasty meals to migrant foreign workers who have been severely hit by the pandemic.

Of course, in the society, the traditional way of doing CSR is also widely observed in the midst of the pandemic. Asia Pulp & Paper from Indonesia and Temasek stood together to distribute free hand sanitisers together with 70 other corporates, unions, universities and community organizations in Singapore. In Thailand, hotels such as DoubleTree by Hilton Sukhumvit Bangkok and Rosewood Bangkok, as well as banks like HSBC Thailand, provided food, care packages, and essential household goods to support the daily needs of vulnerable groups.

Coway Malaysia not only donated 300 air purifiers to over 38 public hospitals in Malaysia, but also a donation of RM300,000 to the Health Ministry to fight the pandemic. Gojek in Indonesia waived the food delivery fees around hospitals and provided vouchers for people who go back and forth among hospitals. Keeping prices low despite surging demand also helps the society, as exemplified by NTUC Income, Sheng Siong and facial mask producers in Thailand.

### Innovation in CSR

Firms are also learning to contribute their CSR in innovative ways. For example, Grab in Singapore launched a new service GrabCare to provide on-demand transportation for healthcare workers. Instead of letting fixed assets stay idle, many businesses re-deployed them for better usage such as transporting and sheltering quarantined personnel. Malaysian airline AirAsia launched the SOS (Save Our Shops) campaign to enable small e-merchants to sell products with zero commission and listing fees on the airline's website OURSHOP.

All these CSR efforts from the private sector are building up strong social capital at various levels, creating unity, care, and support for one another as well as a higher level of innovation.

The people sector and the public sector could provide more support and recognitions for the increased efforts in CSR activities by the private sector during the pandemic. Such appraisals may help to convert intangible social capital accumulated to more tangible benefits for these firms in terms of better motivated employees, more innovative business solutions, better business network with stakeholders, and more business opportunities besides a greater reputation. In turn, a more collaborative and sustainable economic system would be built up and this could be a better normal to maintain even after the pandemic.

*Dr Zhang Weina is a senior lecturer of finance at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School. The opinions expressed are those of the writer and do not represent the views and opinions of NUS.*