

Skills-based Symbiosis: How Mutually Beneficial Civil Society-Private Sector Partnership Delivers Capacity Building

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Summary

Public, private, and civil society organisations form three separate sectors. When the sectors are bridged, many opportunities can be found. In this article, we focus on one such opportunity – making the most of the contributions individual corporate executives may make through cross-sector partnerships. A “Skills-based symbiosis” (SBS) is proposed as a more sustainable version of skills-based volunteering. In SBS, civil society organisations (CSOs), their beneficiaries, private corporations, and their employees can all benefit. This could significantly enhance the impact and longevity of CSOs in Bhutan. Beyond providing immediate technical skills such as finance or marketing, the CSO’s long-term governance may also be enhanced. The advantages and reciprocal benefits of such SBS schemes are articulated below. To illustrate, specific aspects of CSO governance (such as those referenced in Peter Tunjic’s DLMA framework) which may be enhanced through such SBS are also briefly outlined. Case studies of traditional skills-based volunteering and SBS are also introduced.

Introduction

A bee and a flower serve each other’s needs. The flower provides the bee with nectar and the bee helps transport pollen to other flowers and enables reproduction. It is not necessary that they consciously intend to benefit each other. Without external incentives or regulations they form a sustainable interaction or relationship. We call this symbiosis. Many living beings exchanging resources in such a way form an evolving ecosystem.

Ideas from symbiosis may help answer the following questions about developing more sustainable cross sector partnerships between corporations and non-profits/social enterprises:

1. Are there ways that corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be pursued in more sustainable and impactful ways?
2. What are the possible benefits for corporations which encourage their highly-skilled employees to contribute their time and commitment to non-profits and social enterprises?

3. Should we consider the benefits to individuals in addition to how their organisations benefit?
4. Do these benefits also enhance the internal vitality of the corporation or only its external attractiveness and value?
5. How do we measure and account for the social impact of SBS?
6. Can private corporations only help with immediate operational challenges or can they also strengthen longer-term capacity for leadership and governance?
7. Which particular aspect of governance might CSOs in Bhutan enhance significantly through SBS?

The paragraphs below discuss these seven questions briefly. Our hope is to highlight one way of reimagining CSR and skills-based volunteering and stimulate discussions about how this might open new possibilities for action and impact by CSOs in Bhutan.

Evolution of CSR – Skills-Based Volunteering Reimagined as Skills-Based Symbiosis

As CSR becomes more mainstream among multinational corporations, the type of CSR work undertaken around the world has also become more sophisticated. There appears to be a growing interest in skills-based volunteering. This is an employee engagement approach whereby private corporations lend the professional expertise of their staff to non-profits and social enterprises – such as the varied civil society organisations (CSOs) in Bhutan. The professional skills of corporate volunteers strengthens the operational performance and capabilities of the CSOs while the engagement with the CSO and its beneficiaries improves employee satisfaction and talent retention within the corporation.

While moderating a panel discussion on skills-based volunteering (SBV) during the 2017 Annual Conference of the Asian Venture & Philanthropy Network (AVPN) in Bangkok, one of the authors made the following observation. Describing the exchange between corporations and the non-profits as a “volunteer-beneficiary relationship” makes it harder to see the potential for more symbiotic and sustainable engagements. The panellists from India, Hong Kong, and Singapore agreed that the executives contributing their skills frequently benefit from “reverse-mentoring”. They learn more about novel contexts, develop new skills, expand their networks and reawaken their empathy for others.

If we recognise and actively pursue such symbiotic relationships, the engagement can become more sustainable.

It was proposed during that panel discussion that relationships based on a two-way exchange of tangible and intangible benefits between non-profits, beneficiaries, corporations, and individual contributors, could be re-classified as Skills-Based Symbiosis (SBS).

Skills-Based Symbiosis Benefits Both Individuals and Corporations

Individual

To the corporate executive, SBS represents an opportunity to contribute positive social impact and enjoy a sense of purpose and improving his or her overall well-being. This is especially true for older and more successful executives who may be aspiring to meet new personal aspirations or seek to improve the overlap between their personal and professional goals.

Corporation

From the perspective of the multinational corporation, they benefit both internally and externally. Internally, SBS provides an opportunity to grow the abilities of top talent through exposure to unfamiliar environments (e.g local rural regions or in emerging markets abroad). SBS also provides a relatively lower-risk way to test high-potential junior executives and deepen their technical versatility. SBS complements many other forms of CSR to enhance workplace culture, morale, talent retention, and brand affinity of employees – especially among the highly talented and mobile ones.

It is not too difficult to imagine that executives working for multinational corporations in urban India could be sponsored to volunteer their time and expertise with Bhutanese CSOs.

Externally, corporations also recognise that engaging in SBS as a high-impact form of CSR increases their brand's attractiveness. More recently, external benefits pursued include accumulating a reservoir of goodwill among stakeholders such as governments and the communities where the corporations operate.

SBS may viably contribute to pursuing all the above objectives for both the corporations, as well as their talented executives.

Challenges in SBS : Measurement and Accountability

SBS shares a key challenge with some other parts of the social impact ecosystem. This is the measurement of impact in quantitative terms. Multiple impact measurement systems and efforts have emerged, such as Social Return on Investment, Impact Reporting, and Investment Standards (IRIS), and the Global Reporting Initiative.

However agreement among the impact investment sector or government funders on a universal, standardised system is unlikely to be reached.

However, basic quantitative indicators may be complemented by case studies and storytelling. Particularly in the context of employee engagement, it may be more effective to focus on a small number of in-depth case studies, instead of a greater number of cases with less detail. To address accountability to funders and other stakeholders and to promote continued support, the experienced panellists at the AVPN conference discussion advocated creating opportunities for stakeholders to directly witness or interact with ultimate beneficiaries.

Bees choose their flowers based on very precise information that is unavailable to our human senses. Once they receive the information they need, they are naturally motivated to visit the appropriate flowers. By analogy, when leaders of private corporations perceive in fine detail the impact they are having on the ultimate beneficiaries, their support becomes more self-sustaining.

SBS to Enhance Leadership and Governance

Sometimes, the needs of the CSO may be very straightforward and technical. It may need help with accounting or legal compliance or communicating its impact to stakeholders. Corporations have skilled staff who may contribute their capabilities accordingly. For example, a manufacturing corporation may have expertise to help improve productivity and enhance the CSO's ability to serve its beneficiaries. (You can read how car-manufacturer Toyota evolved from financial donor to contributor of skills and knowledge to the Food Bank for New York City here - <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/nyregion/in-lieu-of-money-toyota-donates-efficiency-to-new-york-charity.html>. More details of one specific project at The Community Kitchen & Food Pantry of West Harlem, which helps provide more than 50,000 free meals each month, can be read here - <http://www.tssc.com/nfp-fbny.asp>)

Effective partnering with corporations starts with a clear understanding of the CSO's needs. Organisations that are not yet clear about their true needs may turn to advisory and matching services. One such provider is Talent Trust, which acts as a bridge between charities and multidisciplinary teams of senior executives for diagnosis and assistance. (Talent Trust is an Asian outfit that curates the SBS experience for corporations, their top-level executives, and non-profits. Their model is adapted from the proven model of Pilot Light that has operated in the UK since 2003.) During the process of comprehensively mentoring the leaders of the non-profit over approximately a year, governance issues are surfaced and addressed. For instance, there is the SBS experience of Murton Trust, a small charity based in an agricultural region, which provides learning and development opportunities to people of all ages, through land management and environmental education. (<https://www.pilotlight.org.uk/case-studies/murton-trust>) Murton Trust has a visitor farm, tea room, nature reserve, and educational centre, which they utilise to engage, educate, increase skills and employment opportunities, and enhance well-being.

Also, it may become apparent that one or more of the four functions of governance described in Peter Tunjic's DLMA framework - Directorship, Leadership, Management & Assurance – requires greater attention. Briefly, Tunjic uses the analogy of stewards entrusted with safeguarding a forest for the long-term: Boards and CEOs responsible for the corporation must maintain a focus on both the individual trees (“what to do?”, or Management) as well as the forest (“what will be?”, or Leadership). While traditional risk management functions or “what danger is hiding behind the trees” (“what if?”, or Assurance) will continue to require attention, Tunjic urges greater focus on “what lies beyond the forest” (“what could be?”, or Directorship).

Given the early stage of the CSO sector, it is perhaps in the area of Directorship that CSOs in Bhutan may benefit significantly from SBS. (For more on DLMA see <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-dlma-analysis-peter-tunjic> Final Line up)

In the case of the Talent Trust and Pilot Light model of SBS, in some instances - after a fulfilling engagement with mission-driven non-profits and direct exposure to the beneficiaries impacted positively - the corporate executives accept invitations to join their boards.

There is no “one best way” to pursue high-impact skills-based volunteering. Solutions may need to be adapted to organisational and contextual factors; approaches may need to differ across the dimensions of:

1. Highly-regulated (e.g legal advice) and non-regulated professional skills
2. Client-driven matchmaking (e.g Talent Trust) and clearinghouse platforms (similar to the classified ads section in newspapers or dating websites), as well as
3. Multi-disciplinary team volunteering (e.g Talent Trust again) as opposed to more conventional individual volunteering.

Partnerships are often not easy. Many challenges in engagements between corporations and CSOs will remain. However there are significant gains to be realised. Unlocking value through a symbiosis-focused approach between various sectoral actors is one way which may yield greater and more sustainable social impact for all stakeholders involved.