

# BUSINESS AS A FORCE FOR GOOD

**Louise van Rhyn** and **Mandy Collins**, from Partners for Possibility, argue that business has a bigger role to play in society than “just” making money

For many businesses in South Africa, corporate social investment (CSI) is a checkbox item. It's one of those things that has to be done to satisfy a scorecard. However, there's a growing call to rethink the role of business and the purpose of CSI spend in a broader context.

In the rest of the world, the term CSI is rarely used. Instead, those in the field use the term “corporate citizenship” – an approach where companies take their whole impact on society and the environment into consideration, not just their effect on the economy. In addition, a strong business case for corporate citizenship is increasingly being put forward. Good corporate citizenship has positive spin-offs for reputation management, risk profile and risk management, investor relations and access to capital, and even operational efficiency, among others.

There is also an enormous opportunity for innovation – the kind of innovation that improves wellbeing and prosperity, not just within the company's walls, but within the broader society in which they operate.

This idea of business as a force for good in the world – not just its shareholders' portfolios – fits neatly into the global move towards conscious capitalism. And what it means is that business can become a central

player in the sphere of development, funding and implementing social development programmes where governments or developmental agencies are underresourced. This is precisely where Partners for Possibility (PfP) continues to provide a world-leading

Louise van Rhyn

approach to addressing educational challenges in 366 South African schools that require support. And it's not just us saying so: we've had interest in the programme from around the world, and our model was recently presented at a global conference in the Netherlands by Prof Dirk Brand of the University of Stellenbosch, as an example of co-production and collaboration between the private and public sectors.

We pride ourselves on being at the cutting edge of thinking in this area, because we believe this kind of cross-sectoral collaboration is key to finding solutions to a plethora of South Africa's problems – including education, the area of concern that is fundamental to ensuring a sustainable future for South Africa.

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## SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

Many CSI initiatives take the form of funding, of companies simply throwing money at a problem. But this model doesn't provide any kind of sustainability, nor does it guarantee the success of a project. In the education space, in particular, this approach has not succeeded in producing the quality of matriculant that will make for stellar future employees. Painting classrooms, donating library books and upgrading sports facilities are beneficial only up to a point, and won't uplift the education system as a whole.

As Prof Jonathan Jansen, rector and vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State, wrote in the foreword to the 14th edition of the *Dialogue CSI Handbook*: “It is not a lack of resources that holds back change in schools; it is a lack of imagination.” Instead, he urges business to use its drive for excellence and innovation to help to turn education around.



Mandy Collins

Billions of rands are spent on education-related initiatives every year outside of what the government spends. The figure quoted at the Dialogue CSI Matters Conference in 2012 was R2.75-billion, and is probably higher now. Yet our education system remains profoundly broken, and businesses are having to deal daily with a skills shortage, and a serious lack of quality people to recruit. Clearly, something different needs to be done.

This is where we have seen our programme making a difference. It's not about building new facilities or finding funding for schools – although those things do sometimes happen as a result of the programme. Instead of papering over the cracks (sometimes literally), PfP goes to the heart of the matter and addresses one of the root causes of a systemic problem: that school principals are not equipped for a very complex task.

## BRINGING LEADERS TOGETHER

Because, in essence, this is what being a principal involves: taking a school that is historically endemically disadvantaged, where money and other resources are scarce, and leading it to a place where it produces quality matriculants who are able to contribute positively to the economy. And that's just one part of the job; principals >



Pupils at Stoneridge Primary School in Johannesburg love their playground equipment – it makes play time much more fun.

typically also have to handle budgets, human resources, infrastructure, technological issues and maintenance of the school's facilities. Alone.

They step out of the classroom and into an incredibly complex role, without any equipping for their new task, and are expected to work miracles. Compare their situation to that of the average business leader, who has people around him or her to handle all of those complexities, plus years of formal leadership training, and you begin to see how and why these partnerships work.

As a programme that is simultaneously about leadership development and educational reform, PfP represents an innovation in the field of CSI. It successfully bridges the gap between businesses and beneficiary communities by bringing them together in meaningful ways. And both parties gain an enormous amount from the process.

This is not as much a coaching or mentoring relationship so a partnership in every sense of the word. And the beauty of the process lies in the out-of-comfort-zone learning that happens – for principal and business leader. Every business leader who joins our programme expresses a version of the same message: “This is much more difficult than my day job. The principal I partnered with has taught me so much.”

There are clear benefits for these leaders in the way they conduct themselves back at their places of work. They understand better how to deal with diversity, lead by influence and build an inclusive workplace. They understand that a healthy society, where individuals have equal and quality opportunities, is as important for a thriving society as economic growth.

On the other side of the partnership, we see principals emerging from the programme as changed leaders – at school, at home and in their larger communities. This has a trickle-down effect to their school management teams, the school governing bodies and the teaching staff. And, ultimately, it is the children who gain the most. Because in a school where teachers, parents and other community members value both education and the school, academic outcomes begin to improve.

PfP is a creative, sustainable CSI opportunity. In the 255 organisations that have become involved in the



Anthony Naidoo, senior communications manager at Nedbank, with some pupils from Masakhane Tswelopele Primary School.

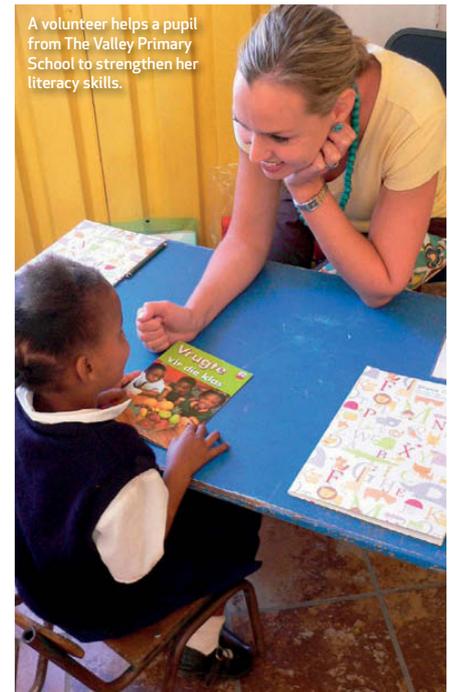
**“CUTTING-EDGE THINKING AROUND CSI AGREES THAT IN ORDER FOR CSI TO HAVE THE BEST, MOST SUSTAINABLE OUTCOME, IT HAS TO MEAN SOMETHING; IT HAS TO ENGAGE MEANINGFULLY WITH ITS CONTEXT.”**

project, PfP is helping to shift the way business thinks about its contribution to educational upliftment and society as a whole. PfP is beginning to see meaningful engagement in terms of corporate responsibility around the creation of something that is urgently needed in South Africa: the strengthening of the country's social fabric, and the breaking down of those boundaries that threaten our unity.

Cutting-edge thinking around CSI agrees that in order for CSI to have the best, most sustainable outcome, it has to mean something; it has to engage meaningfully with its context, and it has to be inclusive within the framework of creating a sustainable future for all.

PfP encompasses all of these elements, working simultaneously towards improving the education system and opportunities for pupils, while creating shared values, and building effective, strong and significant bridges between the education sector and corporate South Africa.

South Africa has a wealth of excellent knowledge, skills and potential for innovation in its very well-resourced business community. When businesses



A volunteer helps a pupil from The Valley Primary School to strengthen her literacy skills.

begin to combine their CSI spend with their minds, their time and their skills, there is an opportunity to work towards a much bigger goal, with a far greater impact: achieving real social upliftment and a better life for all South Africans.

*Partners for Possibility is a co-action, co-learning partnership between school principals and business leaders that aims to empower principals to become change leaders in their schools and communities. ■*