

Comments on CSR, Global Post via Xinhua, 19 May 2015

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Corporate social responsibility booming in Mideast: experts

Local and overseas companies in the Mideast are increasingly reaching out to the public through corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns.

These campaigns incorporate environmental projects emphasizing gender equality, innovation and social entrepreneurship, experts said Tuesday.

According to Dubai-based economist Dr. Nasser Saidi, founder of Hawkamah, the institute for corporate governance, CSR quickly spread throughout the region during the millenium's first decade as an increasing number of local firms decided to publicly list their shares in Middle Eastern markets.

Etisalat, the most valuable firm in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and whose shares are listed on the Abu Dhabi stock market ADX, transformed its CSR strategy in 2012 and launched the mobile baby program, a scheme bringing together major African operators working across borders providing rudimentary healthcare services in multiple countries including Tanzania and Niger.

Ali Al-Ahmed, adviser to Etisalat's CEO, said at the 12th edition of the corporate social responsibility summit, that as Etisalat (the Arabic word means "connections") has 169 million subscribers in 19 countries across the Middle East and Africa, "CSR is not a luxury but a necessity."

The two-day annual CSR summit held by Dubai-based Informa hosts 50 global and local speakers and CSR experts. The conference runs through Wednesday.

International firms with a strong regional footprint have also identified CSR as a means to develop their public profile.

Noha Hefny, director of corporate affairs for PepsiCo, Asia, Middle East and Africa, said at the conference that there has been a tangible shift in regional businesses and organizations as they assumed responsibility for improving sustainability methods and tackling change through social innovation.

CSR is a must, said Dr. Saidi, as it helps company leadership to communicate to their investors, stakeholders, employees, customers and the general public regionally and Internationally that its concerns go beyond bottom-line profit and quarterly earnings reports.

PepsiCo's partner project, liter of light, won the UAE's prestigious Zayed Future Energy Prize in the non-profit organization category. Liter of light brings cost effective solar lighting solutions to communities in need whilst recycling plastic bottles.

"The purest form of charity is to make yourself obsolete. This is why the Liter of Light use an open source platform to teach skills in building solar bottle lights using locally available materials so that clean energy from the sun is easily attainable for everyone around the world," said Illac Diaz, founder of Liter of Light upon receiving the award at the Abu Dhabi sustainability week in January earlier this year.

In his key note address, Khaled Al Kamda, Government of Dubai's director general of the community development authority, said that far from being a financial burden, CSR generates value. "It provides organizations with a 'Social License to Operate,' thus building positive brand image, hence granting credibility within the community, government,

investors and partners.”

Other regional campaign examples are British-Dutch consumer goods company Unilever which runs campaigns in the Middle East teaching children hygienic measures such as hand washing and tooth brushing, and German car producers who regularly run ‘clean the desert campaigns’ where volunteers collect tons of waste from the Dubai desert.

Al-Ahmed said “The UAE’s drive for innovation under the nation’s visionary leadership is a key factor governing businesses to redesign their CSR strategies and programs, contributing to the knowledge-based, smart society of the future.”