

FINDING THE TIN MAN'S HEART – SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION SECTOR¹

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SUMMARY

The construction sector has a very negative image concerning both its social and environmental responsibility. Increased international societal and regulatory pressure is forcing all sectors of development to respect human rights, be socially responsible and align their business practices with the principles of sustainable development. The construction sector, as a significant employer, user of resources, and polluter, will not escape this call for accountability and responsibility. The ability of members of the construction sector to continue conducting business will increasingly be determined by the way in which they conduct business. The lines between social responsibility and sustainable development is also blurring, thus expanding the criteria for social responsibility that businesses are presented with. This paper will look at how the requirements of sustainable development are shaping the social responsibility agenda, how businesses both inside and outside the construction sector are implementing social responsibility, and finally provide some suggestions on what the construction sector can do to meet these requirements.

KEYWORDS: social responsibility, construction, sustainable development

1. INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time there was a woodsman working to win the love of his lady. Unfortunately a wicked witch enchanted his axe and every time he worked with the axe, he would chop off a part of himself – first his legs, then his arms and then his head. Each time the village tinsmith replaced the missing part with one of tin. Finally, the axe chopped his body in half and while the tinsmith gave him a tin body, the Tin Man had lost his heart.²

Like the Tin Man, the construction sector also started off with a real heart and a noble purpose – providing shelter and improving quality of life through the provision of infrastructure. However, the sector also found itself holding an enchanted axe that systematically reduced its humanity to an unfeeling, heartless machine. Today, the construction sector has a reputation for greed, corruption, unfair labour practices and environmental destruction. In a recent international Gallup poll, the sector was perceived as even more corrupt than the arms and energy sectors (Transparency International, 2000). Corruption in the construction sector was also partially held to blame for the high death tolls in recent earthquakes in Turkey and India. A study by the ILO (International Labour Organisation, 2001) found that construction workers almost everywhere in the world do not view their employment in a favourable light and in many countries, both rich and poor, people work in construction out of necessity and rarely out of choice. Few would want their children to enter the industry. The same report also found that among blue-collar workers high rates of gender discrimination and sexual harassment still limits the equal participation of women in the industry, despite government

¹ The construction sector includes all built environment professions, contractors and developers

² The Tin Man is a character in the children's story, Wizard of Oz written by Frank Baum

programmes to promote gender equality in the sector. While the situation is better for women in the built environment professions, they too still deal with high, if more subtle, levels of gender discrimination and harassment.

As the international community places more pressure on all sectors of development to align their business practice with the principles of sustainable development, the construction sector has been forced to confront at least some of its negative impacts. Until fairly recently, the industry focused mainly on its environmental impacts, and even then, the focus tends to be limited to energy efficiency and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and the management of construction and demolition waste. Social responsibility usually stops at construction site health and safety, vocational training, and the occasional charity project. For many in the industry 'sustainability' still means only the ability of the construction industry to continue conducting business.

However, there is increasing pressure on all businesses, including the construction sector, to be more socially responsible and to be accountable for their actions. The draft Chairman's Paper for the World Summit on Sustainable Development calls for actions that: "*Promote corporate responsibility and accountability through such initiatives as the Global Reporting Initiative.*" (Section V [e]) In developed countries, many listed firms are finding that shareholders are increasingly moving their money to businesses with high standards of social responsibility and ethical values. The recent Environics Corporate Social Responsibility survey (Environics International, 2001) conducted in 20 countries, showed that people around the world now focus on corporate social responsibility ahead of either brand reputation or financial factors in forming their impressions of companies, and that this view has strengthened from their previous poll held in 1999. The FTSE Group reported that Socially Responsible Investment grew with 1 000% over the past four years (FTSE, 2001).

While social responsibility is not yet a major factor for consumers in developing countries, there are indications that international funding agencies, trying to defuse the protests at their annual meetings, as well as the governments of some developing and transitional countries, are beginning to look for increased social value from their infrastructure investment. This means that both large and small construction firms, as well as other actors in the industry such as suppliers and professionals, are facing tender conditions that include a measure of social responsibility. Increasingly, the ability of members of the construction sector to continue conducting business is determined by the way in which they conduct business.

While social responsibility is not a new concept in business, its essence is changing as the lines between social responsibility and sustainable development are blurring. The shift towards sustainable development has seen the concept grow to include environmental issues and a deeper understanding of the responsibility of the business sector in providing leadership and a better quality of life. Anita Roddick, founder of *The Body Shop* and modern social responsibility pioneer, describes this responsibility as follows:

"My vision, my hope, is simply this: that many business leaders will come to see a primary role of business as incubators of the human spirit, rather than factories for the production of more material goods and services." (Roddick, 2000)

This paper will look at how the requirements of sustainable development are shaping the social responsibility agenda, how businesses both inside and outside the construction sector are implementing social responsibility, and finally provide some suggestions on what the construction sector can do to find its heart. However, before proceeding to these points, it is necessary to clarify some of the terminology.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE WORDS

2.1 Social responsibility

In Southern Africa there is a saying that a person is not human without other people. When applied, this principle of *ubuntu* means that the individual has a responsibility to take care of the welfare of society, and that society in turn has a responsibility to take care of the welfare of the individual. This

is social responsibility in its purest form. Modern business approaches to social responsibility range from the corporate activism of *The Body Shop* and *Ben & Jerry's*, to company policies on employment equity and employee health and safety that are mainly in response to governmental policy and legislation.

Recent guidelines on social responsibility reporting (Business Impact Task Force, 2000) measure corporate social responsibility according to a business's performance in the following areas:

- Its purpose and values
- How it treats its workforce
- How ethically it deals in the marketplace
- Its impact on the environment
- Its involvement in the community, and
- Its commitment to human rights

2.2 Sustainability and sustainable development

One of the main problems with sustainable development is how the different terms are understood. The terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are the biggest sources of confusion, but within the construction sector we also find the terms 'sustainable settlements/cities', 'urban sustainability', and 'sustainable construction'. 'Sustainable' and its derivative 'sustainability' are especially confusing as they now denote a meta-concept linked to the principles of sustainable development. Thus a 'sustainable construction industry' no longer just mean that the industry is able to continue its business and grow, but also that it supports the principles of sustainable development – which may mean that in some cases it needs to stop growing, or grow in different ways.

The relationship between these terms can be explained as follows:

- The objective is to **sustain** the species *homo sapiens*. That is to support it and keep it alive.
- **Sustainability** is therefore the condition or state which would allow the continued existence of *homo sapiens*, and it is the goal we would like to achieve. However, survival alone is not enough, we also want a certain quality of life that meets our full hierarchy of needs. Ideally, the state of sustainability will allow all human beings to live a safe, healthy and productive life in harmony with nature and local cultural and spiritual values. In order to achieve this state, our relationship with the biophysical environment, as well as our socio-economic relationships will have to meet certain requirements. Firstly we need to balance the needs of humans with the carrying capacity of the planet, and with the need to protect that capacity so that the needs of future generations can continue to be met. We also need to achieve a measure of social and economic equity between individuals, as well as between communities, nations and generations. We therefore have to find a way to (a) ensure that basic human rights are respected, and (b) equitably distribute wealth (in the form of access to resources and opportunities) and increase prosperity for all.
- **Sustainable development** is then the kind of development we need to pursue in order to achieve the state of sustainability. It is a continuous process of maintaining a dynamic balance between the demands of people and what is ecologically possible. Development in this context is also not just seen in its narrow meaning of growth, expansion and acquiring knowledge, but as progress through improvement, evolution and the quest for wisdom. Sustainable development is described by a set of principles outlining the requirements placed on each of the three main arenas of development: the economy, society and the biophysical environment. It is made possible by a set of technological, institutional and value system enablers.
- **Sustainable human settlements** are those cities, towns, villages and their communities, which enable us to live in a manner that supports the state of sustainability and the principles of sustainable development.
- **Urban sustainability** is the broader process of creating sustainable human settlements, especially towns and cities. It includes sustainable construction, but also the creation of institutional, social and economic systems that support sustainable development.
- **Sustainable construction** means that the principles of sustainable development are applied to the comprehensive construction cycle from the extraction and beneficiation of raw materials, through the planning, design and construction of buildings and infrastructure, until their final deconstruction and management of the resultant waste.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

During the Victorian times a model was set for social responsibility that included endowments for social facilities such as libraries, museums, hospitals, schools and orphanages; scholarships and educational grants; and the improvement of conditions for workers by, for instance, providing housing. However, there was no concept of social responsibility as an integral part of business operations. Thus a company could donate a clinic to some underprivileged community, but continue polluting the drinking water of an entire town and use child labour in its factories. These are the incongruities which the new generation corporate social responsibility mechanisms try to address. In the process, social responsibility indicators and reports are, in effect, becoming sustainability reports (Houlder, 2001).

The shift towards sustainable development requires that the focus of social responsibility shift from the external (charity) to the internal - integrating certain principles of responsibility and compassion into the day-to-day actions and decisions of both individuals and companies. For businesses, social responsibility means firstly that principles must be integrated with profits, in other words, that ethics should be as important as profits when making decisions. Secondly it requires that businesses take responsibility for bringing about positive change in the communities in which they operate. Thirdly, it means that businesses should not through their activities create environmental conditions that will limit the survival options of current and future generations.

Sustainable development demands very specific approaches to development in each of the three development arenas mentioned above, and businesses have a social responsibility to see that their operations support these approaches. The demands that sustainable development places on businesses can be summarised as follows.

3.1 In society

The social aspects of sustainable development require that we enable the development of fair and just societies that foster positive human development and provide people with an acceptable quality of life and opportunities for self-actualization. To achieve this the following principles need to be followed:

- Promote social equality amongst people by discouraging all forms of discrimination (e.g. race, gender, religion, physical ability and economic status).
- Respect basic human rights.
- Allow for social and cultural integrity by encouraging and enabling cultural continuity within a global society.
- Foster self-reliance and self-determination.
- Encourage community participation, cooperation and ownership in decision-making, governance and development management.
- Empower people and provide the opportunity for self-improvement through education and the development of leadership and other skills.
- Strive for peace and security at all levels from the individual to the international.
- Improve human health through food security, access to health services and the creation of healthy human settlements.
- Encourage creative expression and the development of inherent potential through activities like sports and art.

These principles are mainly concerned with how a business deals with its own workforce, as well as with the community within which it operates.

3.2 In the economy

The economic requirements of sustainable development call for the development of an economic system that facilitates equitable access to resources and opportunities and the fair sharing of finite ecologically productive space; enables sustainable livelihoods; and establishes viable businesses and industries based on sound ethical principles. The focus is on creating prosperity for all, not just profits for a few, and to do this within the bounds of the ecologically possible and without infringing on basic human rights. To achieve this, the following principles need to be followed:

- Promote equity within countries, between nations, and between generations.
- Encourage ethical business practices such as fair trade.
- Encouraging social and environmentally responsible business initiatives and investment policies.
- Promote an equitable distribution of true costs and benefits so that one group is not impoverished or otherwise harmed to enrich another.
- Support local economies and local job creation through practices such as local economic development, SMME development, local beneficiation of raw materials, using local labour, and supporting local businesses.
- Facilitate co-operative economies and business clustering to empower small businesses.
- Enable collective economic security systems such as Local Exchange and Trade Systems (LETS), community financing and savings schemes, and co-operative projects.
- Measure business success by the triple bottom line of profit, social responsibility and environmental responsibility.

These principles deal with the way a company does business and requires that decisions be driven by more than the desire to maximise profits. This does not mean that a business should not be profit-driven, but rather that it maximises the overall prosperity that can be created and does so in an ethical manner.

3.3. In the biophysical environment

The environmental aspects of sustainable development require that we find a balance between protecting the physical environment and its resources, and using these resources in a way that will allow the earth to continue supporting an acceptable quality of life for human beings (some would say all beings). To achieve this the following overlapping principles need to be followed:

- Protect the earth's life support systems (air, water, soil).
- Protect and conserve the earth's vitality and diversity.
- Use renewable resources no faster than nature can replenish them.
- Minimize the use of non-renewable resources.
- Respect the load capacity of ecosystems, and minimize pollution and damage to the environment and health of all living creatures.
- Encourage the development of circular metabolisms or zero emissions systems in our industrial and settlement development.
- Follow a holistic approach that recognizes the systemic relationships between humans and the greater community of life.
- Conserve the cultural and historic environment (e.g. sacred places and areas of historical importance).
- Instill environmental awareness in all sectors of society.

The environment provides the most basic necessities for survival. Without clean air, clean water, arable soil, and a healthy functioning ecosystem, social equity, self-actualisation and ethical business practices would mean nothing. Everyone therefore has a responsibility to society to protect the environment. For businesses this means changing their day-to-day operations to be more resource efficient and less polluting, reducing the environmental impact of their products, and instilling awareness of environmental responsibility in their workforce, immediate community and community of peers.

4. SETTING AN EXAMPLE

There are already good examples of businesses that have incorporated this approach to social responsibility in their daily business activities, some with more commitment than others. The following four case studies briefly look at how social responsibility can be integrated into normal business activities. The first case study is *The Body Shop*, the second is the large UK based construction company *Carillion*, while the last two are South African examples drawn from the construction sector. These two examples have been chosen to show specifically what can be done in a country with a mainly developing economy, as well as how the approach can be applied in both large and small companies.

4.1 The Body Shop

The Body Shop is probably the most famous example of socially responsible business practice. Its mission statement calls for *The Body Shop* to:

- Dedicate its business to the pursuit of social and environmental change.
- Creatively balance financial and human needs of stakeholders, employees, customers, franchisees, suppliers and shareholders.
- Courageously ensure that the business is ecologically sustainable: meeting the needs of the present without compromising the future.
- Meaningfully contribute to local, national and international communities in which it trades, by adopting a code of conduct which ensures care, honesty, fairness and respect.
- Passionately campaign for the protection of the environment, human and civil rights, and against animal testing within the cosmetics and toiletries industry.
- Tirelessly work to narrow the gap between principle and practice, while making fun, passion and care part of daily life at *The Body Shop*. (Roddick, 2000, p.246)

Founded in 1976, this mission statement reflects the values that helped *The Body Shop* grow to a business with more than 1 800 stores in 49 countries. In many ways *The Body Shop* has pushed the boundaries of standard business practice and set a benchmark for new practices. Founder Anita Roddick sees the company's sense of community as crucial to its success and has identified three levels of community that needs to be nurtured: inside the company, the wider global community to which any company owes certain responsibilities, and the specific communities with which you trade (Roddick, 2000, p.56)

The company as community: Apart from providing a really good employment benefits package, and establishing a Child Development Centre at its headquarters for the children of staff, a real attempt is made to encourage internal dialogue, even to the extent of allowing workers to vote on major decisions regarding the company's values and direction. *The Body Shop* also has a commitment to the personal growth of its employees, and provides paid leave to its employees to serve as volunteers in the community or in places such as orphanages in Romania or Bosnia.

The global community: *The Body Shop* sees itself as a corporate activist, not only giving money to environmental and human rights campaigns, but getting actively involved by organising in-store petitions and using its advertising space to promote these campaigns instead. *The Body Shop* was also one of the founders of The Big Issue, a project to provide an income to the homeless; is a shareholder in a wind farm in Wales; and has set up *The Body Shop Foundation* that provides funding, support in kind, expertise and networking to activists groups working in the fields of human and civil rights, and animal and environmental protection. *The Body Shop* also has very strict sourcing policies, its production plants are being developed towards zero emissions of pollutants and there is an ever-increasing emphasis on renewable resources for raw materials and infinitely recyclable components of machinery and transportation. The company also have social and environmental audits performed independently every two years, and publish these in a Values Report that measure the company's performance against its stated values.

The trade community: Fair trade is promoted through over 37 community trade projects all over the world, from sesame seed oil from a village in Nicaragua to coca butter from Ghana. These projects trade either directly with the communities involved, or through NGO's that support them. The people involved get a fair wage and *The Body Shop* also pays a social premium of 10% to help finance whatever community project they choose.

4.2 Carillion

Carillion is a large international construction services company with about 12, 000 employees and an annual turnover of 1.9 billion British Pounds. The company has a sustainability programme with specific social and environmental targets that is monitored through yearly reports.

The company's head office purchases hydroelectric power and 100% of its electricity is renewable energy. Sixty other office locations have the same objective for the next reporting year. The company's vehicle fleet has reduced CO₂ emissions with 1 000 tonnes between 1999 and 2000. It also

makes a point to incorporate sustainable construction principles in its projects. These include re-use of construction waste and proper solid waste management systems on site.

Every business group within the company has developed a stakeholder dialogue plan designed to improve liaison with its neighbours, local community and interest groups, as well as clients and suppliers. In 2000 *Carillion* invested altogether £400,000 in community programmes ranging from schools support programmes, sponsoring chairs at universities and supporting local community projects. The company also runs Craft Training Centres, which provides training to apprentices and adult trainees in construction crafts and trades. (Carillion, 2000)

4.3 Ninham Shand

Ninham Shand is a consulting engineering firm employing over 500 people in 18 offices throughout South Africa. The company's main social responsibility focus is on education, community support and empowerment.

South Africa is facing a skills shortage in the technological fields, but many school children are hesitant to pursue maths and science as subjects. The company has adopted schools partnership arrangements with local schools in five provinces in South Africa. Through these programmes the company provide bursaries and cash awards for top achievers, and regularly take learners on study trips to engineering projects to encourage them to study subjects such as maths and science and to consider careers as engineers or scientists. As maths and science are taught in English in many schools, the company also provides language facilitators at some schools for learners who have difficulties studying these subjects in a language other than their mother tongue. The company also hosts shadow work programmes for school children in the senior grades. *Ninham Shand's* educational efforts also include in-service training to tertiary students and training support to staff.

Ninham Shand is committed to the empowerment and upliftment of historically disadvantaged communities through involvement in and support of various community initiatives. Apart from considerable financial support, *Ninham Shand* staff has spent thousands of hours of personal time without gain in providing community support and assistance with a variety of projects. These projects focus mainly on sponsorship to community football and rugby associations. (Ninham Shand, 2001)

The company also provided support to the development of a number of small emerging businesses and actively seeks associations and joint ventures with emerging firms.

While it does not pursue social responsibility with the same level of commitment as *The Body Shop*, *Ninham Shand* nevertheless shows how a traditional engineering company can bring about positive social change within the communities in which it operates.

4.4 MAS Architects

MAS Architects is a small architectural and urban design practice serving mainly corporate clients. The vision of the practice is to achieve synergy between technology and nature, while providing desirable, healthy spaces. This is backed by a strong empowerment focus in their procurement and employee development policies.

The company actively educates its clients on ecologically responsible design and try to make their designs as ecologically responsible as the constraints of budget, local regulations and client buy-in allows. It also uses the opportunities presented by the construction of a new building to empower members of the community by using local suppliers and labour, and providing on the job training. Realising that their corporate clients were on the lookout for interesting, locally sourced furniture, they trained local welders to make furniture from recycled metal and then set them up to run their own company. On another project they trained a local stone mason and taught him the basics of running his own business. By the end of the project a former pieceworker had the skills, equipment and contacts necessary to manage his own company and employ other people in the community.

5. TAKING THE BULL BY ITS HORNS

The above examples present some lessons on how corporate social responsibility and the ethics of sustainable development can be incorporated into everyday business practice.

Lesson 1: Develop strong values that are subscribed to by all employees. All four the companies have developed mission statements that commit them to social responsibility.

Lesson 2: It is not just enough to give money to the community; a company must actually be prepared to let its staff become involved in social responsibility programmes and projects.

Lesson 3: Be prepared to recognise opportunities for those who have been disadvantaged and help them to set up their own businesses. This means, once again, more than providing financial assistance. Advice, support, training and empowerment through skills development and mentoring are crucial elements to the survival of small businesses and can be more important to the feasibility of that business than a financial handout.

Lesson 4: Social and environmental responsibility is an integral part of business operations, not just a cosmetic add-on.

As stated in the introduction, the construction sector has a very negative reputation, and most of its social responsibility efforts are seen as mere window dressing. Changing not only this reputation, but also the mindset and practices that led to the sector receiving this reputation, will require effort on a number of fronts. Given the history and specific constraints of the construction sector, it is unrealistic to expect that construction companies, developers and professionals are going to follow the path of *The Body Shop*. However, there are a number of actions that can be taken to put the heart back into the construction sector and help it to be more socially responsible and eventually become a truly sustainable industry. A few possible actions are listed below, but companies can use the requirements of sustainable development to create their own, unique approach that is relevant to their specific business context.

5.1 Purpose and values

- Prepare an internal value statement, code of conduct or business charter that reflects the values the company subscribe to. This should describe the role the company wants to play in society, what it stands for and how it would like to see itself in the future.
- The construction sector being a cut-throat business, it is also important for professional organisations, property owner's associations, and other stakeholder groups in the construction sector to develop a common code of conduct, or at least common social and environmental reporting procedures.

5.2 The workforce

As the saying has it, charity starts at home. The way a company treats its employees, and the values it expects its workforce to uphold is an important part of corporate social responsibility. The following actions can be taken to improve working conditions.

- Improve employee health and safety – provide protective gear suitable for men and women to construction workers; ensure that office environments are healthy and pleasant; provide safe and healthy accommodation for migrant workers on construction sites.
- Support employment equity – give equal pay for equal work, have a strong company policy on sexual harassment, provide separate, safe facilities for women construction workers, rent or build office space with full disability access.
- Provide opportunities for employee development – sponsor further training and skills development; encourage and enable workers to participate in community projects by donating skills and time.
- Involve employees –provide a platform for suggestions, establish a safe mechanism for venting dissatisfaction; consult employees about major changes in the organisation.

5.3 The marketplace

- Make responsible choices – choose business partners on their ethical performance, choose suppliers that subscribe to the same values, choose materials and technologies carefully according to their social and environmental performance.

- Set an example through social/ sustainability reporting.
- Base business decisions on values of compassion, honesty, fairness, respect and responsibility.

5.4 Impact on the environment

- Improve in-house environmental performance by reducing energy and water use and exploring the use of renewable energy sources, and introduce recycling schemes and in-house waste management systems.
- Make ecological responsibility an integral part of project planning and design, construction processes and site management.
- Specify and use ecologically responsible materials and technologies.
- Inform clients about the ecological impact of their projects and suggest ways of mitigating these impacts.

5.5 Being good neighbours

Social responsibility in the community is about having a positive impact on the local community. Actions that can be taken range from charitable donations in money and kind, staff volunteering and offering the use of equipment and premises, to undertakings to limit negative impacts. A good example of the latter is the UK Considerate Contractors' Scheme. This is a code of good practice applying to contractors working in the city that sets criteria for consideration, quietness, cleanliness, responsibility, tidiness, safety and accountability (Cambridge City Council, undated).

5.6 Commitment to human rights

A commitment to respect human rights is fundamental to social responsibility and applies to all organisations, including businesses. At the least, role players in the construction sector can avoid business practices that are in contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and support the International Labour Organisations seven core conventions on forced labour, minimum age, freedom of association, freedom from discrimination, and equal remuneration.

6. IS A HAPPY ENDING POSSIBLE?

Is it possible to reverse the story of the Tin Man? If he can find his heart, he will be able to make responsible, compassionate choices that will restore his head, arms and legs to do work of which he can be proud and so win the love of his lady. By making a commitment to social responsibility, the construction sector can reclaim its heart and use its considerable mental creativity to change business practices that will allow the sector to embrace its community of workers, community of trade, and local and global communities with integrity, pride and dignity, thus finally restoring the sector's legs – its standing and goodwill in the local and international community- and perhaps win the respect and affection of the clients it is wooing and the communities in which it operates.

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