



INCORPORATING THE CORPORATE SECTOR IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CHILD MALNUTRITION: A CASE STUDY FROM EASTERN INDIA

This article proposes a novel strategy to involve the Corporate Sector in India's fight against child malnutrition. The Corporate Sector, whose tremendous potential is hardly harnessed in this grand enterprise, can be effectively put to use with certain readjustments at the policy level. The entire theorization is premised upon an in-situ case study conducted by the author in the capacity of a Government official. The author has endeavoured to join the concepts of Child Malnutrition, Corporate Social Responsibility, Shared Value and the amended version of the Companies' Act, 2013 into a coherent whole in order to prescribe an effective stratagem to combat Child Malnutrition in India.

Child malnutrition: Covid-19 pandemic and thereafter

As it had been predicted at the very onset¹, the Covid-19 pandemic has inflicted a devastating blow to the status of health and nutrition in general and to children's health in particular. Particularly hard hit in this regard, has been the Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) where child malnutrition was already a serious issue, long before the current catastrophe set in. According to the latest reports issued by the UNICEF, around 228,000 children have died on account of drastic cuts in the availability and use of essential public health services across South Asia due to COVID-19 in 2020.²

A persistent Global Problem

Malnutrition in children, for that matter, is one of the persistent global problems. According to the "State of World Affairs" (SWA)² Report published by the UNICEF, globally, *at least 1 in 3 children under 5 is undernourished or overweight and 1 in 2 suffers from hidden hunger.*³ As on 2018, the total figure of malnourished children (under the age of 5 years) stood at 200 million who were victims of the stunting or wasting (The two forms of under nutrition) or both. Also, at least 340 million children were victims of hidden hunger caused due to deficiency of adequate minerals and vitamins in their diets. The third strand of malnutrition, i.e. overweight condition, registered around 40 million children under 5. This issue is at the very core of all the development agendas that engage the attention of the world community in the 21st Century. Out of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations to be achieved by 2030, the second goal, SDG#2, is directly associated with the problem.

The Indian scenario

Of all the LMICs with high levels of child malnutrition, the situation in India is singularly alarming. According to the Global Nutrition Report 2018, almost half of mortality of children in India under the age of 5 is due to some form of malnutrition. According to the latest reports of UNICEF 2019, and ICMR 2019 the total number of children suffering from malnutrition in India is 48.2 million, the highest in the world. The UNICEF estimates that, one in three malnourished children in the world is an Indian.³

In India, as per National Family Health Survey IV (2014-2015, recent in the series) 38.4%, 21% and 35.7% of children below 5 years suffer from stunting, wasting and underweight respectively (corresponding figure



for NFHS III, 2005–2006 were 47.9%, 19.8% and 42.5% respectively). Prevalence of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) in India is 7.5%.³

The governmental initiative in this regard: Programmes and Schemes to tackle malnutrition in India

Various programmes and schemes have been launched by the Government of India that directly or indirectly try to address the problem of under-nutrition in general and child under-nutrition in particular. The Government policy in this regard is to follow a two-pronged approach, the direct nutritional approaches and the indirect multi-sectoral approaches. National Rural Health Mission, National Horticulture Mission, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Janani Suraksha Yojana, Total Sanitation Campaign (Nirmal Bharat Abhiyaan), Mid-Day Meals, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme and National Rural Livelihood Mission are the schemes that have been launched by the Government in recent past to improve the nutritional status in the country.

The need for new strategies

However, despite commendable initiative taken by the Government, the menace of child malnutrition continues to be a serious challenge to the social and economic life of India. With the severe economic setback inflicted by the Covid 19 pandemic, the situation has already deteriorated and is likely to get worse in foreseeable future. Therefore, in order to contain this problem and ensure its eventual annihilation, in the world in general and countries like India in particular, the existing policies and programmes need to be supplemented with new strategies that are effective in the long run. In order to devise such strategies, it is imperative that there is a free traffic of ideas and information among various stakeholders in this global enterprise against child malnutrition. Upon this premise, the following narrative is presented and subsequently a suggestion is offered in the form of a rejoinder. It is hoped that this will offer an entirely different perspective in the global struggle against child malnutrition and make a contribution, however miniscule, to the corpus of existing ideas pertaining to this crisis.

A narrative based on personal experience

While serving as a Government Official in a Community Development Block (CDB)⁴ in a socio-economically underdeveloped region in Eastern India, the narrative is based on my experience gathered while discharging my official duties in an ICDS Project. ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services), incidentally, is one of the major flagship programmes of the Indian Government to improve the nutritional status of children in the age group 0-6 years (along with pregnant women and lactating mothers). This narrative is likely to provide interesting insights into the fight against child malnutrition, in the world in general and India in particular. To that effect, the narrative will be supplemented with certain suggestions that the policy makers might consider pondering over. Therefore, without any further ado, the following case study is presented for the readers' perusal.

The Taldangra experiment

Taldangra is a CDB under Khatra Sub Division of Bankura District in the Indian State of West Bengal. Located at 23°01'N 87°07'E Taldangra CDB contains 145 villages inhabited by around 147893 people, as per the 2011 Census.⁸ Of the total population, members of around 14,373 households (as per 2009 survey) are registered as falling below the poverty line and most of them are from socially and economically backward sections of the society. Because of the predominance of socially and economically backward groups in the demographic profile of this place, the figure of malnutrition among children was naturally high. According to the Monthly Progress Report submitted by the Child Development Project Officer (From whom I had taken over the charge



of the ICDS Project at Taldangra, in March 2013, out of a total 11,727 children registered as beneficiaries of the Government sponsored Supplementary Nutrition Program (SNP), in several ICDS Centres scattered across Taldangra CDB, 316 children were reported as severely malnourished and 2186 as moderately malnourished.

I shall not elaborate upon the ICDS scheme here, since that is not the focus of this article. Interested readers can anyway access the website maintained by the Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India for the details.⁶ Suffice it to say, an ICDS centre constitutes the structural and functional unit of a particular ICDS project and caters to its beneficiaries (Children below the age of 6 years, pregnant women and lactating mothers) a package of six services, namely, Supplementary Nutrition, Pre-school non-formal education, Nutrition & health education, Immunization, Health check-up and Referral services. In an ICDS centre, children are regularly weighed and the body-weight of every child is plotted against his/her age every month in Growth Monitoring Charts. These charts are prepared by the Indian Academy of Paediatrics (IAP) and are based on Harvard growth standards.⁷

On the basis of these plotting, children are categorized as Normal, Moderately Malnourished and Severely Malnourished. Most of the children belonging to the third category are either stunted or wasted.⁸

In all the ICDS centres of Taldangra ICDS Project, the children are given supplementary nutrition in the form of hot cooked meals and takeaway rations so as to meet the nutritional requirements as standardized by the Government. It runs as follows:

TABLE - 1		
Beneficiary	Supplementary Nutrition	
	Calories (Kilo Calories)	Proteins (Gms)
Children (06 months - 06 years)	500	12-15
Severely Malnourished Children (06 months - 06 years)	800	0-25

Source: Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt

The recorded number of severely malnourished children usually ranged from 02% to 04% of the total number of children registered as beneficiaries in the ICDS Project.

Around August, 2015, a singular development took place. Some affluent residents of Taldangra CBD approached the local administration and offered to make some voluntary contribution to the Government's efforts to fight the problem of child malnutrition. The initiative was voluntary and inspired by purely philanthropic concerns. It was decided that willing members of the community would make a monetary donation out of which some special nutritional supplements would be procured for the malnourished children. Funds being limited and the number of malnourished children being disproportionately high, it was decided that the beneficiaries of this project would be the ones who were in the direst need of help, in this case, the children categorised as severely malnourished across 214 ICDS Centres in Taldangra CDB. (The moderately malnourished children were reluctantly excluded from this enterprise owing to their large number and in consideration of the fact that their health status was relatively better than their severely malnourished counterparts.) Consumption of nutritional supplements that are marketed as health drinks for children being a standard practice in Indian households; arrangements were made so that the guardians of the severely malnourished children (All of whom belonged to extremely poor households) could procure nutritional supplements of their own choice for their children out of this community donation. Following the counsels of local paediatricians, children below 2 years of age were excluded from this project. It was also unanimously agreed upon that once a child would move out of this severely malnourished category, this special arrangement made on his/her favour would automatically stop. Thereafter, this practice continued regularly for the next four years till the covid-19 pandemic brought it to a temporary halt.



The official compilation of monthly data pertaining to the malnutrition among children went on as usual. However, once this practice of consuming branded nutritional supplements came into vogue, some interesting developments were observed. Below is presented a detailed data-sheet tabulating the change in nutritional status of children in the project for over a period of four years.

Table- 2

Month & Year	Total number of registered children in the project	Total number of Severely Underweight/Malnourished children	Percentage of children that were severely malnourished
Apr'13	9629	278	2.887112
May'13	9708	395	4.068809
June'13	9766	423	4.331354
July'13	9567	365	3.815198
Aug'13	9403	369	3.924279
Sep'13	10082	365	3.620313
Oct'13	9640	335	3.475104
Nov'13	10003	331	3.309007
Dec'13	9984	311	3.114984
Jan'14	9732	309	3.175092
Feb'14	9727	312	3.207567
Mar'14	9629	278	2.887112
Apr'14	9181	273	2.973532
May'14	9477	263	2.77514
June'14	8953	267	2.982241
July'14	9197	305	3.316299
Aug'14	9398	297	3.160247
Sep'14	9575	297	3.101828
Oct'14	9481	289	3.048202
Nov'14	9260	263	2.840173
Dec'14	9485	238	2.509225
Jan'15	9118	201	2.204431
Feb'15	9074	179	1.972669
Mar'15	9090	234	2.574257
Apr'15	9096	192	2.110818
May'15	8967	210	2.34192
June'15	9216	214	2.322049
July'15	9154	186	2.031899
Aug'15	9676	206	2.128979
Sep'15	10068	193	1.916965
Oct'15	9729	165	1.695961
Nov'15	10164	159	1.564345
Dec'15	10020	106	1.057884
Jan'16	9893	100	1.010816
Feb'16	9868	84	0.851236



Mar'16	9830	81	0.824008
Apr'16	9813	85	0.866198
May'16	10042	109	1.085441
June'16	10154	103	1.014379
July'16	10088	106	1.050753
Aug'16	10176	97	0.953223
Sep'16	10329	93	0.900378
Oct'16	10187	62	0.608619
Nov'16	10296	52	0.505051
Dec'16	10194	60	0.588582
Jan'17	10975	46	0.419134
Feb'17	10975	46	0.419134
Mar'17	11021	30	0.272208
Apr'17	9813	85	0.866198
May'17	9862	28	0.283918
June'17	9710	29	0.298661
July'17	9808	21	0.214111
Aug'17	9787	27	0.275876
Sep'17	9777	27	0.276158
Oct'17	9818	20	0.203707
Nov'17	9804	20	0.203998
Dec'17	10029	18	0.17948
Jan'18	9971	16	0.160465
Feb'18	9997	16	0.160048
Mar'18	9567	22	0.229957
Apr'18	8977	17	0.189373
May'18	10018	19	0.189659
June'18	9592	17	0.177231
July'18	10371	17	0.163919
Aug'18	10254	14	0.136532
Sep'18	10414	14	0.134434
Oct'18	10387	14	0.134784
Nov'18	10500	13	0.12381
Dec'18	10537	13	0.123375
Jan'19	9827	8	0.081408
Feb'19	9846	8	0.081251
Mar'19	10153	8	0.078794
Apr'19	10179	8	0.078593
May'19	10281	10	0.097267
June'19	10331	9	0.087116
July'19	10025	13	0.129676
Aug'19	10073	13	0.129058

Sep'19	9841	13	0.1321
Oct'19	11309	11	0.097268
Nov'19	11113	11	0.098983
Dec'19	10800	6	0.055556
Jan'20	10364	5	0.048244
Feb'20	10146	5	0.049281

Source: *Monthly Progress Report 2013-20, Office of the Child Development, ICDS Centre, Taldangra ICDS Project, Bankura*

It is evident from the above data that the number of severely malnourished children, who were regularly consuming the nutritional drinks, drastically came down. From a figure of 206 severely malnourished children (out of 9676 registered children) registered in the MPR (Monthly Progress Report) of August 2015 (Whence this practice of supplying special nutritional supplements came in operation), the figure came down to 5 (out of 10146 children) in February 2020. Percentagewise, the reduction in the number of severely malnourished children was from 2.12% to .049%.

Moral of the story: Need of Incorporating the Corporate Sector

On the basis of this case study, we have at our disposal, one instance of successful management of the problem of child malnutrition by the administration of commercial nutritional drinks. However, there is one fundamental impediment in replication and application of this strategy at a wider scale in the country. In India, the issue of malnutrition is by and large, a Government prerogative. ICDS Scheme, which is a forerunner in this regard, is funded jointly by the Union and the individual State Government and is managed and administered exclusively by the functionaries of the latter. As of now, there is no provision at the policy level, whatsoever, to involve large business corporations in this enterprise.

For a wider scale application of the Taldangra experiment, for that matter, reliance on the generous philanthropy (As witnessed in the case study under discussion) of the civil society will not be a very practical idea. Rather, a direct involvement of the Corporate Sector in this enterprise would be a much more feasible strategy. The situation, therefore, begs the question, "Can anything, under the present circumstances, be devised to this effect?"





The CSR route

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), can be a very effective tool in this regard to ensure meaningful participation of the corporate sector in Government run welfare programmes, such as the ICDS Scheme. This concept of CSR, which enjoins upon companies to make a positive contribution to the society, in tandem with their regular business activities, off late, has emerged as an inescapable priority for business leaders in every country.⁹ CSR in India, for that matter is much more than a mere ethical and moral imperative of the business sector vis-a-vis the society. India is the first country in the world to legally mandate corporate social responsibility. According to the rules in Section 135 of India's Companies Act (Companies Act, 2013 amended in April 2014 and in operation from April 1, 2014). The amended law requires companies with a net worth of INR 5 billion or more, or an annual turnover of INR 10 billion or more, or net profit of INR 50 million or more, to spend 2 percent of their average net profits of three years on CSR.¹⁰

As per the provisions of the law, Corporations falling under its purview are mandated to undertake CSR activities only in "project/program" mode. A detailed guideline regarding what kinds of activities come within the ambit of CSR includes hunger and poverty, education, health, gender equality and women empowerment, skills training, environment, social enterprise projects and promotion of rural and national sports.

CSR in India: The prevailing haze

In the absence of a clear cut framework and objectively defined goals, the concept of CSR in India still continues to be mired in ambiguity. According to the reports of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, many of the listed companies often fail to meet up their CSR obligations. While some of these companies spend less than the mandated amount, some others are often in a quandary about identifying the areas where society needs a corporate intervention. It has also surfaced that, in many cases, these companies simply resort to monetary donations to Government funded welfare projects in order to be on the right side of the law. Such practices, surely, are out of sync with the true spirit of CSR.¹¹

Ambiguity and confusion over CSR will only unnecessarily hamstring the performance and overall productivity of the private sector which will be eventually detrimental to the national economy. Therefore, under the circumstances, it is imperative that a strategy be devised that is easy to follow, easy to monitor and is mutually and genuinely beneficial for the business establishments as well as for the society.

However, in a vast country like India, society is plagued by myriad problems and complications. The various national and international companies that ply their trades in this country, too, have diverse policies, practices and interests. Under such circumstances, formulation of a standard CSR guideline that suits the purpose of all the stakeholders in this enterprise is not a practicable idea. It is probably more feasible to devise a strategy that identifies specific social issues and specific types of business organisations and unites their interests on a symbiotic basis. On this line of thinking, this paper makes a particular suggestion, taking the problem of child under nutrition and the health drink manufacturing companies into account.

The Health Drink Market in India and the CSR activities undertaken by Companies

Before that, however, I would give a brief sketch of the health drink market in India. According to reports, India is the largest market of various brands of Health Drinks and accounts for about 20% of the world's retail volume sales.¹² As on 2017, the total market value of Health Drinks in India stood at USD 860 Million and was predicted to grow with a CSGR of 15% for the next six years.¹³ Popular brands that currently dominate the Health Drink market in India are Horlicks and Boost (manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline), Bournvita (manufactured by Cadbury India), Complan (manufactured by Zydus Wellness), Pediasure (manufactured by Abbott Nutrition), Milo (manufactured by Nestle), Amul (pro) (manufactured by Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation) etc.

All the above mentioned companies fall under the ambit of the CSR law. It is however, beyond the scope of this article to elaborate upon the CSR activities of these individual companies. A perusal of the annual CSR reports published by these companies reveals that, there is considerable commonality in the CSR activities undertaken by them. By and large, it can be said that, awareness generation and arrangement of training programmes as regards issues pertaining to health, nutrition and diseases, skill development among the members of the deprived sections of the society, development of rural infrastructure, financial support to students in the form of scholarships, environmental up gradation etc are some of the most important areas where these companies invest their time, wealth and energy. Most of these activities are implemented in programmes and projects that are already run by the Government. Such collaborations of the Private Sector, where the gigantic Government machinery is already in operation hardly make any significant impact in the long run. It is therefore imperative that a more effective strategy is devised that can harness the real strength of the corporate sector and the Government's efforts for the betterment of the society.

The suggested strategy and the Benefits accrued by the society

A very practical strategy for these nutritional beverage companies to make their CSR contributions in the area of hunger and malnutrition would be to make their products available for consumption to malnourished children from less privileged backgrounds. This can be affected in a very simple way. When it comes to spending the stipulated money in the form of CSR, a nutritional beverage company can straightaway donate the equivalent quantity of the product to the public authorities. The Government, with its elaborate institutional framework can easily make these products available to the deserving beneficiaries on a priority basis. For instance, Government officials working in the field of malnutrition in India can ensure that these products are distributed among the malnourished children through the Government run ICDS centres located almost in every Indian village. Even more, the ICDS workers can be entrusted with the task of administering these products on a regular and systematic basis to the malnourished children. On the basis of the wonderful effect of these products, as I have observed in Taldangra ICDS Project, there is every hope of success once this scheme is replicated on a larger scale.

Simultaneous benefits accrued by the Companies

On the other hand, these nutritional beverage companies will also be immensely benefitted out of such an arrangement. First of all they will be relieved of the tiresome onus of clarifying their CSR involvement before the public authorities. The practice of official compliance to CSR activities by Business Corporations in India, as of now, is at an incipient stage with considerable ambiguity associated with the standard framework of delivering the CSR obligations. Plethora of surveys and reports on business ethics in the context of CSR underlines that neither the Corporations have a crystal clear idea as to what is expected of them nor does the society and the Government are clear about their expectations from these Companies. Therefore, under the circumstances, an unambiguous and objective strategy will be beneficial to all the stakeholders involved in this deal.

Also, perhaps more important, is the fact that such an arrangement will go a long way in securing the long term business interests of these Companies manufacturing nutritional supplements for children. For generations, the business of these brands has been confined in Urban India mainly among the affluent sections. The enormous rural sector remains largely untapped by these Companies. This arrangement that I propose will also enable these companies to penetrate this enormous market and advertise their products to the masses that are yet unexposed to them. Though these overtures of the Companies, as a part of their CSR program, will be made out of charity and will be without any economic considerations, in the long run they will ensure the creation of an enormous market for their products.

Also, the public image of these brands will be magnified manifold once their involvement in this noble mission becomes a common knowledge. This will fetch many short and long term dividends to these companies if they consolidate their position in the Indian market.



The obstacles and the concept of Shared Value

There is, however, a formidable legal obstacle that stands in the way of realization of this suggestion. The amended Companies Act, 2013 mandates that the CSR activity undertaken by a Company should not be in the area of its operation.¹⁴ This prohibition, however, is somewhat out of harmony with the mainstream perspective with respect to CSR that is currently in vogue in the world. Here, I intend to draw the attention to the concept of "Shared Value" which is becoming increasingly popular in theory as well as in practice, all over the world, in the context of CSR. This concept of shared value was first conceived by Professor Michael E. Porter and Mark Kramer in a seminal article in *The Harvard Business Review* titled, Strategy & Society: The Link between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility.¹⁵ Here, the authors proposed an arrangement which is mutually beneficial to the Business Corporations as well as to the society. In a nutshell, the theory suggests a Business Corporation to identify social needs which have some bearing upon its business activities. Next, the authors advise the Corporation to confine its social duties and responsibilities to those particular social needs and make necessary contributions. This tactic of selective philanthropy, (according to SV theory,) instead of mindless and indiscriminate charity, will cater to the business interests of the Corporation as well and thus will be mutually beneficial to both the involved parties. The prohibition in the Companies Act, 2013 that forbids listed Companies in India to undertake CSR activities in their respective areas of operation, once done away with, through an amendment, will synchronize CSR policies of the Indian Corporate Sector with the highly popular and effective "Shared Value" strategy. Given the fact that Forty-eight sections of the Companies Act,¹⁶ 2013 have already been amended in 2020 in the Indian Parliament, one or more changes can, anyway, be deliberated upon.¹⁷

Conclusion

Through the narrated case study and the subsequent suggestion in the form of a rejoinder, this article seeks to unite the potential strength of the public and the private sector in addressing a grave and serious social issue in India, Child Malnutrition. To that effect it proposes framework wherein the society and the Business corporations (Here a particular category of Companies, however, have been taken into consideration) can be united on the basis of a symbiotic relationship. The crux of the argument is that both the Government and the Private Sector need to harness their very best to put up a formidable fight against the menace of child malnutrition. It has also been argued that, this strategy, being based on the concept of shared values and interests would be far more effective than current CSR strategies focussing on forcible extractions and grudging compliances. The entire theorization has been premised on first hand field experiences of the author who takes full responsibility of the veracity of the reported facts. ■

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