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No sustainability without inclusiveness, Kenyan businesses told

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By Claire Wanja

Kenyan businesses risked losing opportunities and failing the sustainability test if they don't commit to be more inclusive in their business practices, a leading knowledge centre has said.

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Sustainable Inclusive Business (SIB) Kenya, an initiative of MVO Netherlands (CSR Centre the Netherlands) and KEPSA Foundation, says companies can become more competitive and profitable by creating sustainability and improving the lives of people.



SIB Coordinator in Kenya, Ms. Karin Boomsma, observed that the world faced many challenges ranging from global warming to poverty, pollution, diseases, species extinction, water scarcity and refugees, among others. She noted these challenges presented businesses with opportunities to come up with creating solutions that future proofs their businesses, benefit people and sustain the planet.

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"Starting from the basics of taking better care of employees to improving the lives of the community around which a company does business and developing products and services that brings more people into the mainstream economy, everyone can get involved in doing something," said Boomsma.

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Philips Kenya, for instance, worked with the Kiambu County Government to renovate the Githurai Lang'ata Health Centre in Kiambu and equip it with technological interventions such as solar powered ultra-sound machines, solar energy for indoor and outdoor lighting and a laboratory with refrigeration equipment for medical supplies with short shelf lives. The use of solar lighting has made it possible for the facility to operate 24 hours a day, reduced the hospitals spend on electricity by 80% and improved security in the area.

The services at the hospital are free partly due to a borehole that can provide up to 86,000 litres of water. The borehole project was financed by Philips. Water from the borehole is sold at discounted rates to the community and the money obtained is ploughed back to the hospital.

"The partnership between Philips and the Kiambu County Government is testimony to what corporates can do to build sustainable projects that impact the community in the very long run," said Boomsma.

SIB targets 100 companies that can take the steps and measures towards sustainability and inclusiveness. These

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include making a risk scan and plan for the company, plans and actions for energy saving, reducing emissions and waste, greening the business, innovation of products and services, sustainable trade relations, improving labour conditions and human rights as well as job creation.

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Ms. Boomsma argued that pursuing inclusivity as a business fundamental enhanced the likelihood that a business will grow bigger both in scope and profitability.

She gave the example of the much talked about mobile money platform, MPESA, which has not only increased the number of the banked population but also created a lucrative and sustainable income stream for mobile service provider, Safaricom.

"MPESA is not just a brand. It is a dream come true for millions of real people in real situations," said Boomsma. "That people at the base of the economic pyramid can have their bank right in their mobile phones is nothing short of phenomenal," she added.

Ms. Boomsma called on businesses to look beyond profits to the sometimes less romantic aspect of investing in people and the planet.

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Businesses are often under pressure from shareholders to deliver on targets. Amid the cacophony, it often seems unrealistic to focus on people (except as consumers) and on the planet (except as a source of raw material).

The way out of this is for businesses to include sustainability and inclusiveness in their long term strategic plans. This ensures that sustainability is pursued as part of the core business and not as tokenism to make the corporation look good. An inclusive business directly reaches people living at the base of the economic pyramid.

"Forget the old CSR," advised Boomsma. "The new CSR is a commitment to sustainably invest in people and the planet. It is the little steps taken to integrate low-income people into the value chains. It is about empowering people to participate in markets as producers, buyers, suppliers and consumers. It is also about empowering companies and investing in the community around which the business is located."

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