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Should businesses focus on profit or biodiversity?

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Businesses that demonstrate commitment to environmental conservation can have competitive advantage in attracting and retaining loyal

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“That is not our core business”. “It is CSR, alright, but it is not romantic enough for our business”. “We don’t have money or time for that at the moment”. “How is that connected to our business”? “What is the return on investment”?

The foregoing are hypothetical questions and statements but having worked with and for CEOs over the years, I can say that they are not very far from the actual statements made on the corridors and in boardrooms of many businesses. CEOs often find it difficult to find a direct linkage between biodiversity and their businesses. Even where resources are available for a CSR initiative, many CEOs would rather support football or rugby or even music extravaganza for budding artistes than commit resources to the protection of biodiversity.

Yet biodiversity is the basis for our food, medicine, fuel and livelihoods. Our cherished cultures and traditions also revolve around it. In fact, biodiversity is the enabling factor for a sustainable, thriving society, environment and economy.

Additionally, businesses that demonstrate commitment to environmental conservation can have competitive advantage in attracting and retaining loyal customers, suppliers and employees.

In essence a compromised biodiversity can severely compromise our lives leaving us vulnerable to disease, crop failure, unemployment and increased squalor. Some of the major challenges that humanity confronts today are directly related to a stressed up biodiversity. Think climate change, water and food scarcity, new and emerging diseases and even insecurity with and outside our borders. Nevertheless, awareness is growing as businesses increasingly come to terms with the interconnectedness between biodiversity and the very existence of their businesses.

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Every business has impact on biodiversity and biodiversity is impacted by every business. Biodiversity is a key measure of the health of any ecosystem, and of our entire planet. It is the sum total of the interdependence between all life forms and the conditions needed to sustain life. Whether you use water, sand, soil or running a factory, the natural balance of the original environment will be impacted.

Fertilizers you spray – do they kill bees and insects that exactly should be there?, It goes without saying, therefore, that businesses, whether they be in horti/flori, agro, construction, finance, telecommunication, tourism, extractives or energy, have an important role to play. Businesses don't need to be big or have a lot of money to play a role in protecting biodiversity.

They don't even have to set up a separate CSR unit, though it is desirable. They just need to do what they do efficiently. Biodiversity protection can be part of their DNA so that it comes naturally as they do business. Here are some of the ways businesses can protect biodiversity. One, you can have your business audited and certified for inclusivity and sustainability.

Sustainability refers to how well your business impact people – employees, the community, suppliers, customers, etc, while sustainability refers to the impact, positive or negative, that the business on the environment. There are many organisations, locally and internationally that are concerned with this kind of work.

KARIN BOOMSMA, director, Sustainable Inclusive Business.

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