



Debunking Social Responsibility: The Myths, Methods and Mindset

A 2016 UVic CAPI Blog

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The last month of 2016 brings my last blog as a Centre for Asian Pacific Initiatives intern at the Malaysian Social Research Institute. I wanted to write this last written episode of this UVic CAPI experience about something we interns are taught to examine and explore throughout this unique opportunity: social responsibility. This term is brought up often in the CAPI pre-departure week as a sort of ongoing homework: something we have to critically examine in ourselves, our organizations and the structures that organizations must integrate within (international bodies such as the United Nations and UNICEF). Students might also be familiar with social responsibility through courses with subject matter such as development, globalization, the United Nations and governance. This blog is a personal attempt to de-bunk the stigmas and approaches to social responsibility as an intern working for a NGO providing support to the Middle Eastern refugee population in Malaysia.

Social Responsibility: A Definition

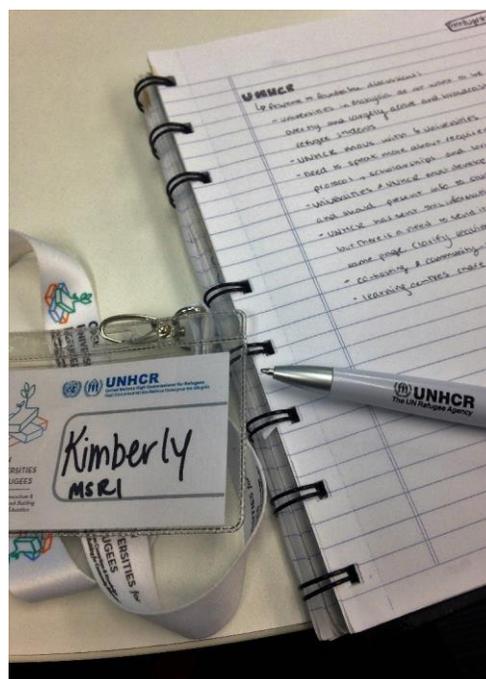
In non-governmental organizations, the

term social responsibility gets thrown around a lot. It is both an individual and an organizational prerogative for employees and volunteers in this sector, yet it seems that there is little effort to establish a clear definition of the term and the implications behind it. This can cause misunderstandings as we are taught to automatically assume what social responsibility is.

Like with most terminology associated with social justice, there can be some different - but not contradictory - definitions of social responsibility.

Social responsibility is an ethical theory, in which individuals are accountable for fulfilling their civic duty; the actions of an individual must benefit the whole of society. In this form, there must be a balance between growth and the welfare of society. If this equilibrium is maintained, then the act of being socially responsible is accomplished.

Left Photo: Attending a UNHCR conference on refugee education with MSRI.





Left Photo: One Friday at around seven at night, after one particularly heavy monsoon rain, the ceiling in the MSRI library began leaking, causing water damage to the priceless MSRI publications and art archives. We saw a need to digitally store these works online and Danae and I began scanning and archiving these fragile texts for our Uvic Capstone Project.

Photo Below: Get to know your coworkers outside of work! Here is a photo of MSRI's Education Manager Andrea and myself on a staff weekend trip to nearby Cameron Highlands.



The difference between Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Responsibility

Corporations have a different approach and definition of social responsibility. Investopedia's definition of social responsibility is the idea that businesses should balance profit-making activities that benefit society; it involves businesses with a holistic and positive relationship with the society in which they operate

(<http://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/socialresponsibility.asp>).

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) places the relationship to the society and environment in which business corporations operate as "a critical factor in their ability to continue to operate effectively. It is also increasingly being used as a measure of their overall performance." This form of social responsibility in business is called Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Corporate Social Responsibility means that individuals and companies have a duty to act in the best interests of citizens, non-citizens, the environment and other aspects of society as a whole.

Common Misconceptions of Social Responsibility

Since taking on the Administrative Coordinator role at the Malaysian Social Research Institute SSC2 School, I have received a lot of emails from volunteers who want to gain experience working in education for refugee children and corporations that want to provide funding or in-kind donations for the school. The two of these emails are fantastic; however, there are at times red flags that MSRI has to be careful of. We are often asked to take photos of the kids enjoying the donations (usually for Corporate Social Responsibility purposes). This has the possibility to become problematic for several reasons. First, we are providing education for a vulnerable population that must remain nameless to Malaysian officials - including police. Taking these photos and posting them on a company website destroys the protection MSRI School has fought so hard for. Secondly, many children do not want their photo taken for other privacy reasons - this is exceptionally the case for the Unaccompanied Minors. We also do not want to give away the location of the school online.

We are taught in Canada a number of aspects that we can ascribe to social responsibility. In high school, I remember seeing advertising for organizations that sponsor children and questioning the reality of these children seeing the effects of donations. It is possible to have good intentions but to cause harm. Social responsibility is then about researching, listening and planning before actions can be made.

Therefore, being Socially Responsible means that people and organisations must behave ethically and with sensitivity toward social, cultural, economic and environmental issues. Striving for social responsibility helps individuals, organisations and governments have a positive impact on development, business and society with a positive contribution to bottom-line results.

What are the Implications of Practice and Purpose with Social Responsibility?

The theory of social responsibility is built on a system of ethics, in which decisions and actions must be ethically validated before proceeding. If the action or decision causes harm to society or the environment, then it would be considered to be socially irresponsible. Moral values that are inherent in society create a distinction between right and wrong. In this way, social fairness is believed (by most) to be in the "right", but more frequently than not this "fairness" is absent. Every individual has a responsibility to act in manner that is beneficial to society and not solely to the individual.

Social responsibility is an ethical framework and suggests that an entity, be it an organization or individual, has an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large.



Photo Above: MSRI members participating in a group brainstorming exercise surrounding child protection policy at a UNICEF forum in Ipoh, Malaysia.

Ways to incorporate Social Responsibility into a CAPI Internship

1. Pitch in however you can: Danae, Claire and I prepared jam sandwiches at the school canteen for 200 students as the cook was on leave for an appointment with the UN.
2. Work hard and with care on projects you might not get to be a part of or see the results of. After spending a week organizing on the weekend the 2016 Youth Ambassador Conference with Dignity for Children, I was not in attendance for the actual event.
3. Step up if others are cautious: offer to present the groups research and findings in the capacity that you can.
4. Participate in work events inside and outside your internship. Develop personal and positive bonds with coworkers.
5. Take the extra time and creativity to think outside the box. The school counselor and I planned, organized and facilitated an all-day all-grade poster competition with snacks and refreshments and prizes. This event was originally just for the kindergarten class; however, we found creative ways to raise money for materials and supplies and were able to let each MSRI SSC2 student participate. All of the children's posters are now hanging in the school.
6. Pitch in with respect when you can and where you can. Margot, Claire and Danae mopped the floor of the library after heavy rainfall caused the ceiling to leak. This happened at seven pm on a Friday!
7. Work weekends - especially if it means that you get to help out a different program that you normally work in. I met so many amazing people in the social enterprise sector in the refugee community in Malaysia through volunteering at CINTA craft fairs and contributed to the new program model going forward with the lessons I had learned and the people and stakeholders I spoke with.