

Communication for Socially Responsible Initiatives

Seema Sharma & Deepa Mann

This paper discusses the communication strategies adopted by the corporate while planning and implementing their CSR initiatives in India. Based on the data collected from five companies – a private sector, a public sector, a private-private joint venture, a public-private joint venture and a multinational corporation- the paper finds that the CSR communication within the companies is top driven. There are different levels of stakeholder involvement in CSR communication. With respect to the communication between the corporate and the communities, the paper contends that the companies simply may not have communication specifically focused on them. In addition, the communication strategies adopted by the corporate and implementing partners in the communities run the risk for the corporate houses of either hearing what they want to hear or of the communities' dominance over the company.

Seema Sharma is from Department of Social Work, University of Delhi. *Deepa Mann* (E-mail: deepamanndsw@gmail.com.) is from Labor Department, Government of NCT of Delhi

Introduction

Communication plays an important role in determining how the CSR initiatives of a company are viewed by the stakeholders, more specifically the public at large. In fact, a large part of the literature on CSR communication is aimed at identifying the communication strategies adopted by the business houses to brand themselves as socially responsible organizations. However, besides this, an effective communication can play a very important role in the success of CSR interventions in the communities. The Companies' Act 2013 has mandated CSR for a large number of companies in India. While the companies are being encouraged to take up CSR initiatives especially in the communities which are in and around their business operations, it is very essential for the companies to deliberate upon the communication strategies that they adopt in the field for their CSR interventions. The prevailing communication strategies of the corporate aimed at the employees, consumers, prospective consumers or the shareholders may not work in the new context

in which the corporate is being encouraged to engage with the communities. However, not much literature is available on the communication in the context of the community-corporate inter phase for CSR interventions in India. One may perhaps look into the available literature on development communication to understand the context in which the message is received and interpreted by the communities and also the suitable vehicle for this communication. While the literature on development communication emphasizes on the need for a communication strategy that can facilitate desired social change; the corporate world is yet to come to terms with the language that such communication requires and to make it part of their communication strategy. This process necessitates a dialogue amongst the stakeholders of CSR. This paper aims to highlight the communication strategies presently being used by the corporate for their CSR intervention. The paper is based on the data collected from five organizations in the course of understanding their CSR processes. The data collected underscores the need for research to identify effective communication strategies in the emerging social and legal environment within which CSR now operates. The paper takes the stakeholder's perspective on CSR. The stakeholders focused on in the context of CSR are the organization, its employees, the communities and the NGOs.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Carroll (2008) maintains that CSR is the product of 20th century. While the concern of the business community for

society can be traced back to centuries through their philanthropic initiatives, however, the present form of CSR is a new phenomenon through which the corporate aims to achieve competitive advantage while also making responsible interventions in the communities. CSR may be defined as the fulfillment of economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities by the corporate (Ibid). In India the state has taken lead in defining and contextualizing CSR (Sharma, 2013). The Department of Public Enterprises (DPE), Government of India had defined CSR in 2010 in the following manner:

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CSR is a company's commitment to operate in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner, while recognizing the interests of its stakeholders. This commitment is beyond statutory requirements. CSR is, therefore, closely linked with the practice of sustainable development. CSR extends beyond philanthropic activities and reaches out to the integration of social and business goals. These activities need to be seen as those which would, in the long term, help secure a sustainable competitive advantage (Department of Public Enterprises CSR Guidelines, 2010)

This definition has been further clarified in the revised CSR guidelines prepared by DPE in 2013. The new defini-

tion identifies the stakeholders of CSR and has also removed the term competitive edge from the earlier definition of 2010. The revised guidelines define corporate social responsibility and sustainability as the “company’s commitment to its stakeholders to conduct business in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner that is transparent and ethical. Stakeholders include employees, investors, shareholders, customers, business partners, clients, civil society groups, government and non-government organizations, local communities, environment and society at large” (Department of Public Enterprises CSR Guidelines, 2013). In addition, the schedule V11 of the Company’s Act, 2013 outlines the activities that shall constitute corporate social responsibility.

Stakeholders of CSR

Typically, stakeholders are a group of individuals who may affect or get affected by the business activities of an organization and these generally are the shareholders, employees, customers, supply chain and now the environment and civil society. The communities around the business operations of an organizations have, for long not been considered as major stakeholders in organizations’ business activities in India on account of the fact that they did not wield power and their claims were never considered as urgent even if these may have been legitimate. The controversies surrounding land acquisition and rehabilitation by the business are a proof of that. The CSR mandate in India takes these communities as major stakeholders of CSR. The

revised DPE guidelines clarify that the stakeholders of CSR are “the employees, investors, shareholders, customers, business partners, clients, civil society groups, government and non-government organizations, local communities, environment and society at large” (Department of Public Enterprises CSR Guidelines, 2013).

The stakeholders have traditionally been seen through the prism of power, legitimacy and urgency of the claims (Mitchell et al, 1997). The organizations with this perspective are likely to prioritize the competing claims of the stakeholders on the basis of these criteria. Consequently, they may end up giving more weightage to the power and urgency of the claims since these are seen to be having more impact on the business in the short term. However, this perspective needs a complete review in the present context of CSR in India.

Communication in CSR

The success of the CSR initiatives and their sustainability depends on the communication strategies adopted by the corporate in connecting and communicating with the stakeholders and this communication must be in the form of a dialogue. The stakeholder’s dialogue is a two

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way communication and negotiation process (Burchell & Cook, 2006). It aims to co- create a shared understanding between the company and its stakeholders (Johnson- Cramer et al, 2003). While dialogue may be the most suitable form of communication in CSR, the organizations may follow three different communication strategies namely the stakeholder information strategy, stakeholder response strategy and stakeholder involvement strategy (Morsing & Schultz, 2006) in CSR communication. In the stakeholder information strategy one way communication takes place in which the organizations tell and the stakeholders listen. Companies using this strategy acknowledge the power of stakeholders to influence the company both positively and negatively and therefore the desire to inform them of the good acts of the corporate so as to ensure their support (Smith, 2003; Morsing et al, 2006). The stakeholder response strategy is a two way asymmetric communication model. The communication flows to and fro amongst the stakeholders but this strategy is largely a one-sided approach as the sole intention of the organization is to convince its stakeholders. Thus the companies many a time seek feedback within the framework developed by them and thus end up hearing what they wish to hear. The stakeholder's dialogue takes place in the stakeholder's involvement strategy of communication. This is also a two way communication model and is more symmetrical in nature. This strategy underscores the importance of involving stakeholders for developing CSR initiatives which are mutually beneficial with an understanding that both the parties are willing to change.

The success of the CSR initiatives in communities requires a stakeholders' dialogue. This dialogue ensures that the stakeholders are committed to solve their common problems (Waddock, 2000, Burchell & Cook, 2006). Through the process of dialogue, a collective sense making is achieved and if it is a guided dialogue; then the organization can compile and coordinate various competing views of the reality and produce a single account for action; a process referred to as guided sense making (Maitlis, 2005). CSR initiatives implemented in this manner in the communities are likely to have a better chance of bringing desired changes in these communities.

Theoretical Framework

The paper takes the stakeholders' perspective on CSR. Taking cue from the revised CSR guidelines 2013, it looks into the CSR communication with respect to the following stakeholders: the employees of the organization, implementing NGOs and the communities. The CSR communication of the corporate in relation to these stakeholders has been analyzed within the framework of stakeholders' dialogue and the process of guided sense making. (Maitlis, 2005). The CSR communication strategies given by Morsing et al (2006) have been used to analyze the CSR communication of the corporate.

Research Methodology

The data for the research was collected from five organizations* which had their corporate offices in Delhi NCR.

These organizations represented private sector, public sector, private-private joint venture, public-private joint venture and a multinational corporation (MNC). The master list of the organizations was prepared by combining lists from three different sources namely; The Confederation of Indian Industries, Department of Public Enterprises (Government of India) and Ministry of Large and Medium Enterprises (Government of India). The consolidated list had 951 companies whose corporate offices were in Delhi and NCR. On careful scrutiny of the list, a total of 264 companies were found to be engaged in CSR. After applying the inclusion criteria of taking only those organizations that had been in business for at least ten years and were engaged in CSR initiatives for at least five years, the number of companies involved in CSR came out to be 256. This list was then divided into five categories namely public sector, private sector, joint venture (private-private), joint venture (public-private) and MNC (Multinational Corporation) to get representation from different sectors to understand their CSR communication with identified stakeholders. The stratified lists thus obtained included 20 public sector companies, 58 private companies, 14 joint ventures (public-private), 65 joint ventures (private-private) and 99 MNCs.

Then through simple random sampling, every 10th company was contacted from each strata seeking their cooperation for the study. Only eight companies agreed to participate in the study. The list of eight companies included one public sector undertaking, two private companies, one joint venture (private-private),

three multinational corporations, one joint venture (public-private). Of these eight companies, the researcher purposively selected five companies which had at least one CSR project in Delhi and NCR.

The data was collected by using a mix method approach. Interview schedules, questionnaires, focus group discussions and observations were used to collect data from management, employees, trade unions, NGO representatives and the communities. Table 1 provides a brief of the five organizations whose CSR communication strategies were studied.

Beyond Legal Obligations

While the companies which fall within the stipulated financial limits as per the Companies Act, 2013 now need to undertake CSR, there are reasons beyond this mandate that have motivated the corporate to undertake these initiatives even before CSR was mandated. The five corporate studied underlined following reasons for taking up CSR initiatives. The first reason is the desire to relate CSR with the stakeholder response. The company B thus prefers to implement CSR initiatives in areas near the plant to avoid opposition and unrest from the community arising out of the company's business operations. It relates its CSR initiatives with the response of the communities around its area of operation. It recognizes that the stakeholders of a company especially the communities may be affected by its business operations. The positive aspects of its operations such as increased economic opportunities may be accompanied

Table 1 Summary Profile of Organizations

Name of Organization*	Nature of Organization	Major Areas of CSR Initiatives	Implementing Agencies
A	Private company engaged in manufacturing	Ideal village project and youth development	Foundation
B	Joint Venture (private-private) engaged in manufacturing	Social initiatives and community development initiatives	CSR Department
C	Public Sector Undertaking from energy sector	Extending support during national emergencies, community development programs, health initiatives and education	NGOs
D	MNC engaged in FMCG	Projects for the visually challenged and for the children	Foundation and NGOs
E	Joint Venture (public-private) engaged in power distribution	Vocational training, women literacy, blood and clothes donation, medical services for the communities	NGOs

* The names of the organizations have been withheld to maintain confidentiality. The terms business house, organization, corporate and companies have been used interchangeably in the paper to cover the business organizations that are undertaking CSR

by the negative impacts such as environmental hazards, traffic jams and issues arising out of land acquisition. The CSR interventions of the company help to reduce the negative response of the communities towards its operations. Secondly, the CSR initiatives of an organization are seen as means to enhance business opportunities. The companies may thus look at the CSR initiatives as tools to improve the purchasing power of the prospective customers and to enhance the company's brand image. For instance, company D views children as their prospective customers. It focuses on child development, education and vocational training so that it can enhance its customer base in future. Similarly, company E also views its CSR initiatives as investments to increase their loyal customers. The third rationale

for undertaking CSR initiatives provided by the companies is that these initiatives contribute towards getting a competitive workforce in future. The company C views CSR interventions as an opportunity to build future workforce. The company maintains that their contribution towards education and vocational training will provide them with competitive workforce in future. Company D also considers its CSR as a mechanism for getting competitive workforce in future and hence focuses on children as part of its CSR. The fourth rationale is that CSR activities facilitate the building of a satisfied and prosperous society. A satisfied and prosperous society in turn positively impacts the business and result in development of both the company and the country. For instance, company A is of the opin-

ion that CSR should not be seen within the narrow perspective of deriving direct benefits out of it. It sees CSR as an endeavor to build a satisfied and prosperous society and hence takes up CSR initiatives across the country.

All the five organizations consider investment in the communities through CSR to their competitive advantage; let us look at how communication is used by the companies to engage with the stakeholders to meet their CSR goals.

Communication on CSR

The present paper has considered employees, NGOs and communities as the three stakeholders of the organizations to understand their CSR communication. The communication on CSR in the five companies has been interrogated at three levels in this paper. These are:

1. Within the organizations.
2. Between the organizations and the NGOs.
3. Between the implementing agency (the CSR department of the corporate, its foundation or the NGOs) and the communities.

Let us look at the communication of the corporate in relation to the stakeholders at all the three levels.

Communication within the Organizations

The communication on CSR within the organizations must necessarily flow

amongst all those who are directly or indirectly part of the CSR. There are thus different stakeholders amongst whom the communication on CSR flows within the organizations. The communication with respect to CSR within organizations is likely to flow amongst the top management, the implementing staff of the CSR decisions and the employees of the organization.

The CSR communication flow in all the five organizations follows a top–bottom approach. All the CSR decisions are top driven and are communicated to the staff at the implementing level. The communication between the top management and the implementing staff is largely restricted to the management seeking inputs, feedbacks and clarifications to facilitate its decision making. Since the direction of CSR is scripted by the top management, the implementing staff receives directives for action and it ensures that the written communication in the form of reports is regularly submitted and necessary approvals for the projects are taken from the top management. The findings from the field show that the top management may not necessarily take cognizance of the CSR projects related inputs provided by the implementing staff.

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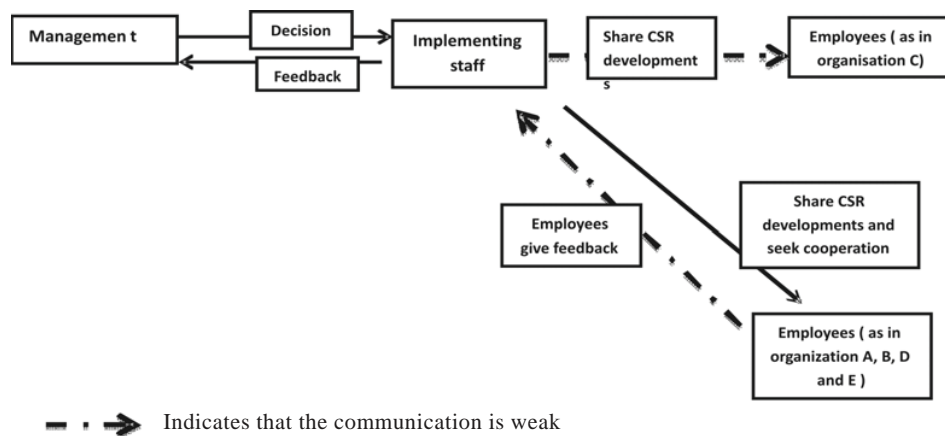
The study found that most of the communication on CSR with the employees of the organization is done through the annual reports, the company websites or

through circulars/notices. The e-mails are used as communication vehicle by those organizations which have engaged their employees directly in CSR activities. Four organizations engaged their employees in CSR activities at some level. Of these, organization A involved its employees as instructors in their schools and as volunteers in community development initiatives. However, the employees were not in any way part of the decision making process of the CSR interventions. The organization B engaged its employees in identifying the beneficiary group under one of its project. The organization D sought suggestions from its employees on the nature and type of CSR activities and their implementation. The employees could communicate with the CSR implementing staff on the activities that could be incorporated as part of the CSR and the NGOs that could be contacted for implementation. Organization E, by and large, used its employees as volunteers for the implementation of some of its activities such as blood donation camps. It communicated with its employees to

seek their volunteering through the mails and their CSR website. In organization C, the communication between the CSR department and the employees was extremely weak to the extent that many employees were not aware of the activities of the CSR department. A few employees did not even know the existence of the CSR department.

We find that there is an exchange of communication in organizations A, B, D and E. Although it is a two way communication, it is an unequal exchange with the power to direct the communication lying with the organization. This communication is a form of stakeholder response strategy. On the other hand, organization C applied stakeholder information strategy while implementing their CSR initiatives. In the stakeholder information strategy, one way communication takes place in which the organization tells and stakeholders listen. The favorable corporate CSR decisions and actions are communicated to the stakeholders of the company (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Fig 1 Flow of CSR Communication within Organizations



Communication Flow between Corporate, NGOs & Communities

Communication between the corporate, NGOs and the communities follows an interesting pattern. Two organizations, viz. C and E did not engage directly with communities. Their CSR programs were communicated, clarified, translated and implemented via the implementing partners (NGOs) whom they had selected. Organizations D and B were directly engaged with the communities through their CSR department/ Foundation and their programs were run in collaboration with the local panchayat or the community based groups. Organization A was involved in CSR directly with the communities through its foundation. It also worked through NGOs in the communities. It had two projects. In one project, its employees identified the community group and organized various activities and under the other project it provides fund to the implementing partner/ NGO to run their initiative. Let us look at these communication patterns separately.

Communication between Organizational Staff & NGOs

The communication between the staff of the corporate and the NGOs follows a top bottom approach. The pattern of communication as was observed within the organizations i.e., between the management and the implementing staff, is by and large replicated at this level. The implementing departments of the corporate were the communication centers from where the decisions and commands flowed and were transmitted to the NGOs. The NGOs were

seen to be complying with these commands and providing feedbacks on the performance in the field- both written and verbal. The organizations that engaged NGOs for implementing CSR initiatives viz., A, C and E were more like the funding agencies and therefore laid down the grounds of engagement and communication with the NGOs. The conditionalities, the deliverables and the number of communities, the reporting formats as well as frequency of reports and the monitoring mechanisms were decided by the corporate and clarified to the NGOs. Company C selected the implementing NGOs through a process in which the NGOs gave an expression of interest. There was no scope for further discussion as all the major decisions for the project were taken by the corporate based on their focus areas. Similarly, organization D decided the areas of intervention and scope of the project and the NGO acted as the implementer with a minimal say in the deliverables of the project. The NGO submitted its project reports which largely focused on the achieved targets. Organization B did not engage NGOs for its CSR implementation.

While NGOs are seen as stakeholders in the CSR process, it is seen that there is no dialogue between the NGOs and the corporate. It is an asymmetrical two way relationship in which the corporate exercises power on account of holding the purse strings.

Communication between the Corporate & Communities

Although all the five companies considered communities as their major stake-

holders in CSR and had undertaken initiatives in the communities, however only two companies of them, A and B, engaged this major stakeholder in planning and implementation of their CSR activities. The remaining three organizations did not directly communicate with the communities in the entire CSR implementation cycle except during some programs which were held in the communities or for the purpose of monitoring. Organization A while availing of the services of NGOs in the community also worked directly with the communities through its foundation.

There were three types of community involvement in the implementation process thereby unfolding different communication strategies used by them while engaging with the communities.

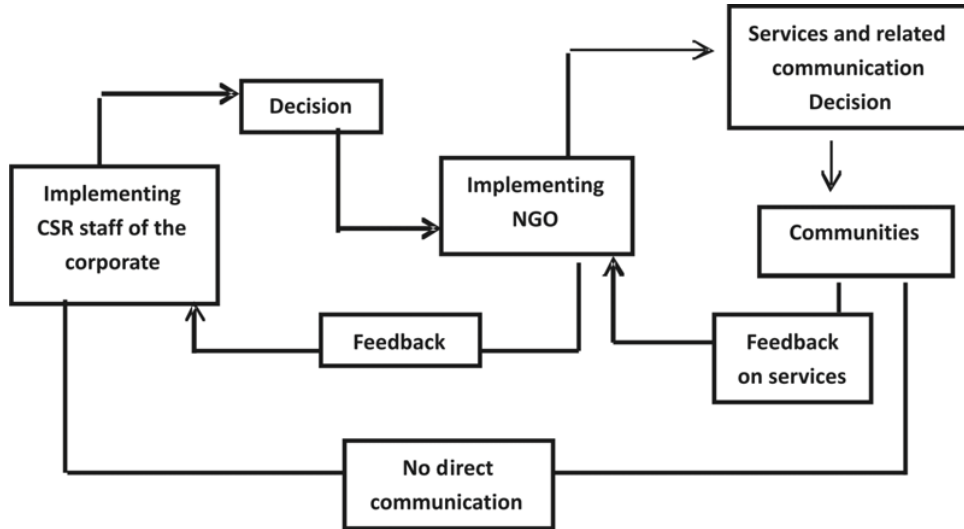
1. Organization C follows the stakeholder information strategy with the communities just the way it uses with its employees. The communities do not play an active role in the CSR initiatives except for availing the services under CSR and providing feedback on these services which is collected as part of the impact evaluation exercise. Organization C either invites applications for implementation of CSR initiative from the interested NGOs or these NGOs themselves approach the corporate to seek financial support for their projects. It then negotiates the area of operation, conditionalities and expected outcomes with the NGOs who then implement the initiatives. The NGOs by and large function as service providers on behalf of the organization. The corporate does not directly con-

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nect with the communities. Consequently, it does not have a clear understanding of the community needs. The direct channels of communication between the corporate and communities are absent. It is the NGOs which provide the missing communication link between the corporate and the communities and as implementing partners communicate the organizational interventions to the community. The extent of alienation of the communities from the entire process can be gauged from the fact that many of the community members were not aware that the organization C was providing the funds and support for the initiatives of which they were a part. This is not to say that the communication between the communities and the NGOs is one of dialogue. The NGOs being service providers deliver the services to the community which is the recipient. The communication originates from the NGOs and is received by the community which interprets it and responds in the form of feedback. In the same way, organization D also follows the stakeholder information strategy and communicates with communities through NGOs. The communication flow between these organizations and the communities is given in fig. 2.

Company E identifies themselves the areas of CSR intervention and the initiatives on its own and then looks for an NGO which can undertake the implemen-

Fig. 2 Communication Flow between Organizations (C, D) & Communities



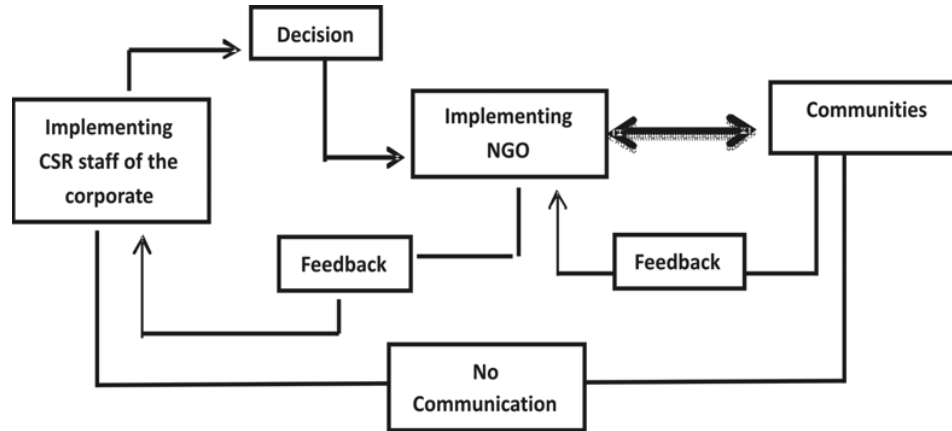
tation. It then seeks feedback of the communities on the initiatives through the implementing NGOs. The NGOs after seeking feedback from the community implement the CSR initiatives of the company. This mechanism is different from the need assessment of a community. It is more on the lines of a feasibility study of the proposed initiatives. The data from the community reveals that the implementing NGOs take the organizations' proposed areas of intervention to the community and sell the intervention to the community and motivate people to avail the benefits from the programs that have been designed as interventions projecting them as the best solutions for addressing their problems. The data shows that the company adopts the stakeholder response strategy. Though it is a two way communication here, it is predominantly an one sided approach in which the company uses NGOs to seek feedback on issues but questions put forward are a

reflection of what the company intends to offer. This strategy runs the risk of hearing what one wants to hear (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Fig. 3 depicts the flow of communication between the corporate and the communities.

The community involvement process is adopted by companies A and B where by the communities identify their needs and put up proposals for an intervention to the company. Company A engages with the community through its foundation and company B through its CSR department. Although both the companies directly communicate with the communities for CSR initiatives, there are differences between the two. Company A uses the method of community involvement in the adopted village. The community mem-

The communities see themselves as part of the company.

Fig. 3 Communication Flow between Organization E & Communities



*(The overlap of flow of communication between NGOs and communities shows that what has gone in as questions comes out as response from communities)

bers are involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the CSR projects in the village. The communities see themselves as part of the company. This kind of response is likely to come when stakeholder involvement strategy is consciously adopted. The stakeholder involvement strategy adopts a dialogue with its stakeholders. In this persuasion may occur but it is from the side of both the stakeholder and the organization; each trying to persuade the other to change. The symmetric communication model is based on the progressive interaction of sense making and sense giving processes (Morsing et al, 2006). So ideally, both the company and the stakeholders will change as a result of engaging with each other through this model.

Company B has adopted a community for development initiatives. The villagers have over the years started to take lead in planning the desired initiatives.

They now conduct monthly meetings and decide the initiatives for which they wish the company to provide funds. This is discussed with the representatives of the company and the funds are released for all the proposed initiatives. The community views the CSR initiatives of the company as a give and take relation. It believes that since the company has to run its business in the area it should maintain it. The community claims that it also extends help to the company at the time of crisis such as strikes and unrest by contract labor and therefore the company is obliged to reciprocate. Though this is a two way communication it has the potential of stakeholders' dominance. Figures 4-5 explain the communication of the two companies with the communities.

Conclusion

Organizations are found experimenting with different ways of communica-

Fig. 4 Communication Flow between Organization A and Communities

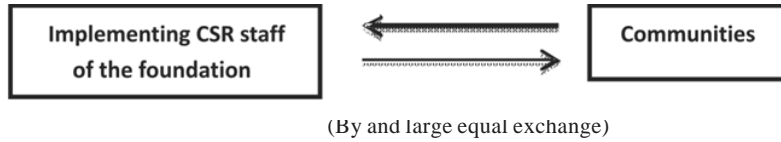
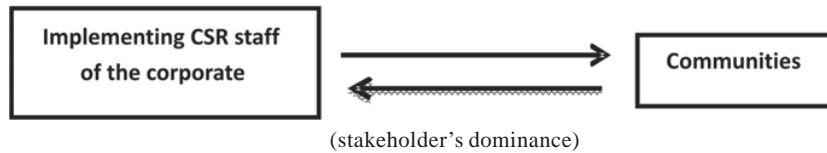


Fig. 5 Communication Flow between Organization B and Communities



tion in the area of CSR. There are multiple issues in the process of communication on CSR. First, while there are a number of stakeholders in CSR, however on account of the CSR mandate under the new Companies Act 2013, the communities emerge as an important stakeholder; especially those around the area of operation of the corporate. Therefore, the organizations need to have strong communication channels with the communities. However this channel is absent in three of the five corporate who have substituted this missing link with the NGO networks in communities. These NGOs in turn again have two patterns of communication – one with the corporate and other with the communities. The communication pattern of NGOs with the corporate is defined and scripted by the business houses. It is by and large one way communication where the commands flow from corporate and the implementing partner interprets the commands and gives feedback on actions taken. The nature of this communication dictates the communication pattern of the NGOs with the communities wherein they carry for-

ward the message of the corporate and seek the desired response. A complete break of communication between the corporate and communities and a complete reliance by the corporate on the NGOs to fill the deficit in communication may not be desirable in the long run. In the case of those organizations which have direct engagement with the communities, we find that the communication channel is open both ways. The communication may originate from any side but there is an ongoing exchange between the communities and the corporate. At the same time, this two way communication also has its limits. This was amply demonstrated in the case of organization B where it was the power of the communities which dominated the communication.

One also needs to take cognizance of the fact that the employees have more of a passive role in the CSR initiatives of the organizations. The study also underscores the power difference amongst the various stakeholders of CSR. While the stakeholders' approach celebrates a dialogue amongst the stakeholders, however

the reality shows that the corporate tend to have the maximum power and set the ground rules of the communication that takes place amongst the three stakeholders.

It needs to be highlighted that the communication for change needed in CSR requires that the message must have roots in the culture of those communities towards which it is directed and the message should use the medium with which the communities are comfortable. It is therefore necessary to experiment with new models of communication. These models of communication should be based on a guided dialogue and should enhance the scope of legitimacy in the stakeholder's dialogue.

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