Introduction

The promotion of social responsibility in the business environment is not an easy enterprise. It takes more than just knowledge application, methods, tools, or budget. It takes persistence and institutional will, since the creation of behavioural modification and transformation of mind set requires efforts and commitment for the long term.

With over 5400 undergraduate students, 2800 post-graduates, significant publication and research, and over 45 years of tradition, the Faculty of Business Administration of the Externado University of Colombia is committed to the integral development of managers who are capable of taking on the challenges of the 21st century. With the initiative “First Steps in CSR” programme, Externado, with the partnership of the Global Compact Network Colombia, address this important challenge through students, professors, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), big company signatories of the Global Compact, and other institutions, such as unions and business associations.

Challenges

Even though the issue of corporate social responsibility is not new in Colombia, and currently is recognised a major commitment from the various institutions that promote it, many companies still not familiar with the concept social responsibility or its implication for a company’s operation, especially in SMEs.

Studies, such as the Inter-American Development Bank and IKEI (2005), the Colombian Centre for Social Responsibility and IPSOS (2006), and the survey of the National Business Association of Colombia (ANDI), which has been doing this survey since 2004, show, respectively, how between SMEs there exists a medium and low level of implementation of CSR activities in Latin America, less knowledge and implementation of CSR in comparison with large companies, and obstacles, such as lack of knowledge of the topic or associated costs, and lack of allies and cooperation.

Data demonstrate the importance of opening spaces for awareness, promotion, training, and support for entrepreneurs in the country, particularly SMEs. This is especially important because the SME sector, according to studies such ESSER (1996) and SNIJDER (2003), is essential to the development of a country, in part due to its high capacity for job creation, increased efforts in generating GDP, and export growth.

Actions taken

To address this issue, 2006 saw the convergence of different efforts in the circuit of teaching, research, and extension, resulting in “First Steps in CSR” programme. This programme is a cooperation exercise and generation of synergies between academia, business, and institutions where students, trained as

1 Note: Full references can be found in the Second Edition of the Inspirational Guide, available late Sep 2013.
junior consultant, and accompanied by expert instructors in CSR, perform specialised technical advice that impacts the management of SMEs.

For this, we constructed a series of methodologies, protocols, and tools that facilitate the realisation of a complex exercise – consulting outside the university, but with the same academic rigor, and building trust among all stakeholders.

Despite high acceptance by students and teachers, implementing this initiative brought certain difficulties, including the need for other resources, coordination of different actors and, in particular, the lack of interest in participating by SMEs.

These difficulties were gradually resolved by generating new instruments and cooperation agreements with different public and private organisations. However, the active and fluid participation of SMEs was achieved through the agreement with the Global Compact Network Colombia in 2011 and the strategy of linking companies in the supply chain of a large corporation.

During the programme, participant entrepreneurs identify the status of their company compared to major international conventions of social responsibility, define their stakeholders and their main expectations, and initiate an improvement process that seeks to strategically meet the business goals, and enable them to improve their performance in social responsibility, in the short and medium term.

**Results**

Through December 2012, the programme has yielded the following results:

- Linking large companies, such as Petrobras, ENDESA, ETB, and Pacific Rubiales
- Participation of 220 SMEs and 525 students (386 undergraduate and 139 post-graduates)
- Cooperation with institutions, such as Confecamaras, Chambers of Commerce of Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Barranquilla and Cartagena, the IADB, and the IMF, ASOCOLFLORES, Colsubsidio Fenalco Bogota, SENA, and the Superintendence of Companies
- Construction of intervention methodologies CSR in SMEs
- Providing virtual platform support to consultants
- The publication of documents, articles, and CSR methodologies, in partnership with several other institutions, such as the Guide to Responsible Business, for SMEs, published in conjunction with Confecamaras, the IMF, the IADB, Proexport, and the Ministry of Social Protection, among others.

For the students:

- Improves the quality and relevance of the training provided by the university
- Raises awareness for their work as future managers
- Gives them advantages in the job market, based on knowledge and practical experience

For the entrepreneurs:
First Steps in CSR programme, Good Managers, Better Colombians

- Raises awareness of the social impact of their management and their responsibilities as managers
- Lets them know of risks and opportunities for their business
- Offers concrete improvements in the short and medium term

For the faculty:
- Promotes the value of these methods
- Links them with today’s business reality
- Strengthens research and social projection

For the Global Compact Network Colombia:
- Strengthens its academic offerings and incidence of positive action
- Promotes the institutional mission of corporate responsibility
- Links new businesses to the Global Compact

For more information, visit: [http://190.7.110.123/irj/portal/anonymous/fac_administracion_empresas/fae/facultad/rse/primerospasos](http://190.7.110.123/irj/portal/anonymous/fac_administracion_empresas/fae/facultad/rse/primerospasos)

The role of PRME/sustainability principles

The “First Steps in CSR” programme is expected to:

- Continue raising awareness, changing learning and behaviour among students and participating employers, and expanding coverage nationally, in partnership with the Global Compact Network Colombia and institutions operating regionally.
- Publish practical tools, including a book, on responsible supply chains, with reference to practices in the region, in agreement with the Regional Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Support of the Global Compact.
- Continue efforts to generate institutional synergies that raise awareness, discuss and seek alternatives of joint work, such as the Diploma Curse in Business and Human Rights (openly offered to entrepreneurs by the University Externado of Colombia and the Global Compact Local Network), workshops of the Global Compact Network Colombia and other initiatives, such as the mirror committee of ISO 2600, the Colombian CSR Guide with the ICONTEC, Inclusive Business Bureau with CECODES, and participation on the editorial board of the journal RS (responsibility/sustainability).
- Continue with efforts to promote public debate on the challenges of social responsibility in different institutions and scenarios, such as forums and meetings including, for 2013, the planned the participation as event organisers of the II Colombia Global Compact Congress, the academic and fair event “Colombia responsible,” and the Second Congress of Ethics and Social Responsibility, involving all sectors entities.