

Private Sector Engagement in Environmental Outreach Projects in Thailand

Walker Young ¹

¹ Environment, Development and Sustainability Program, Graduate School
Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract. As a Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Thailand has to comply and implement at the national level the articles of the Convention as well as the decisions adopted by the Conference of the Parties (COP). At the same time, academic and public sector stakeholders involved in Thailand's implementation of the CBD have experienced low levels of interaction with the private sector. A survey was undertaken to understand the sentiment of the private sector in Thailand towards corporate social responsibility (CSR), the CBD, and public-private partnerships. A total of 36 companies participated, with a response rate equal to or less than 6.58%. Respondents displayed low familiarity with the CBD (35.3%) but a high level of engagement (65.6%) in environmental outreach projects. To better engage the Thai private sector in environmental outreach partnerships, the public sector should consider tailoring engagement requests to focus on those issues which appeal to the business community and those needs where private contributions (e.g., financial, technological, managerial) are most likely to be provided.

Keywords: Private sector engagement, corporate social responsibility (CSR), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

1. Introduction

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is an international multilateral environmental agreement which came about through the collaborative efforts of the 172 governments which participated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the 'Earth Summit') from June 3 to June 14, 1992. As stated in Article 1 of the Convention, the objectives of the CBD: are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources, including by appropriate access to genetic resources and by appropriate transfer of relevant technologies, taking into account all rights over those resources and to technologies, and by appropriate funding [1].

More than simply a multilateral agreement on environmental management, the CBD can be envisaged as the major international agreement governing sustainable development in that it goes into trade and development alongside sustainable use of natural resources.

Thailand signed the Convention on June 12, 1992, and undertook ratification on January 29, 2004. As a Party to the CBD, Thailand has to comply and implement at the national level the articles of the Convention as well as the decisions adopted by the Conference of the Parties (COP). The implementation of the Convention is meant to be a multi-stakeholder process inclusive of the business community. In the last three meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the CBD (COP-8 in Curitiba, Brazil; COP-9 in Bonn, Germany; COP-10 in Nagoya, Japan), the significance of the private sector and business community has reached a high point. Each has issued a decision which focused entirely on business and private sector engagement.¹

¹ See COP-8 Decision XIII/17 ("Private-sector engagement"); COP-9 Decision IX/26 ("Promoting business engagement"); and COP-10 Decision X/21 ("Business engagement").

Further, the frequency of references to business and private sector has also increased. The COP decisions adopted at the COP-8 meeting contain 46 instances of the word “private” (as in ‘private sector’) or the word “business”; the number of same word appearances increases to 51 instances in the COP-9 decisions and even higher to 81 instances of “private” or “business” within COP-10 decisions [2]. This can be understood to represent the growing importance which the Parties to the CBD place on engagement with the private sector and on businesses in particular; indeed, the term “business sector” appears with higher frequency in the COP-10 decisions as opposed to “private sector”, something not previously seen in the COP decisions.

The increasing relevance of the private sector to the national implementation of the CBD does not seem to have resulted in higher levels of engagement with the business community towards such implementation. Limjirakan, et al. (2009) conducted a survey with the public sector and academic employees in Thailand who are engaged in the implementation of the CBD and found that 35 of the 100 survey participants experienced low levels of collaboration with the private sector and only 20 of the 100 experienced a high level of engagement [3]. However, insufficient private sector representatives participated in the 2010 study conducted by Limjirakan, et al. (2009), hence the sentiments of the business community towards public-private partnerships which focus on emergent environmental issues representative of the CBD were not assessed at the time. However, the initial study provided the basis for the research described herein.

There are emerging trends in the business community, such as the growth in corporate social responsibility, which give precedent to the idea of businesses engaging in environmental projects. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be defined as the treatment of a company’s internal and external stakeholders in an “ethically or in a responsible manner” as is “deemed acceptable in civilized societies” in an effort to “create higher and higher standards of living, while preserving the profitability of the corporation” [4]. “Social” here is understood to include environmental as well as economic target issues. In this view, CSR is a voluntary mechanism whereby corporations could elect to address environmental issues which are relevant to the kinds of thematic areas raised by the CBD, such as climate change adaptation, carbon emissions trading, and reforestation to name but a few.

In order to understand the preferences of the business community and the interest of the private sector in the thematic areas which comprise the CBD, many questions need to be asked. For instance, are Thai businesses engaging in environmental outreach projects which could contribute to national implementation of the CBD? If so, what are the most common thematic areas of engagement? Are Thai businesses embracing CSR, and if so, are they focusing efforts on environmental issues or social development? Answering these kinds of questions would be extremely helpful for Thailand’s national implementation of the CBD. An online survey questionnaire is a simple and effective way to pose such questions to numerous businesses.

2. Methodology

An online survey questionnaire was distributed via e-mail and accessible via the Internet. The survey contained a total of 27 multiple choice questions, some with optional write-in answers. In order to give greater accessibility to the diverse business community in Thailand, the survey was made available in Thai and English languages.

2.1. Audience

The survey was targeted at private sector businesses with operations in Thailand. Other stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academia were not eligible to participate in the survey since the questions were specifically formulated to gauge certain elements of private sector sentiment and decision-making processes.

Within the private sector, all business types were eligible to participate including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and corporations. The reason for the open eligibility to all business types and sizes is because the CBD literature does not preclude any business type from engaging in the implementation of the Convention and actually encourages engagement with all [5].

2.2. Administration

In order to reach as many members of the business community as possible, business groups and associations were approached and asked to disseminate the survey information to their contacts via e-mail distribution lists. Several groups agreed to do so, including the Net Impact Bangkok Professional Chapter, the CSR-Thailand Yahoo! Group list, the Management System Certification Institute of Thailand (MASCI), CSR-Asia, and the Danish-Thai Chamber of Commerce. The survey information was also distributed via individual e-mails to business leaders and other potential private sector participants.

3. Sample of Survey Results

Only a sample of the survey results is given in this section because the entire responses covering all 27 questions in the survey are too lengthy to capture and discuss herein. Results to questions regarding environmental outreach and corporate social responsibility (CSR) appear respectively in sections 3.2 and 3.3.

3.1. Response Rate and Demographic of Participants

The survey was known to reach at least 668 persons through all available channels described in section 2.2 above. However, given that not all distribution contacts confirmed the number of persons to whom the survey was sent, there is some margin of error whereby more persons may have received the survey invitation. A total of 44 responses were received, resulting in a response rate equal to or less than 6.58%. This rate is in line with expected rates of similar online survey responses as recorded by Marcussen [6].

Of the 44 responses, eight were declined access to the survey due to ineligible affiliations (i.e., academic or public sector workers), leaving the number of participants at 36 unique businesses. These participants came from a variety of industries as shown in Table 1. The variety of responses reflects the diversity emblematic of the Thai private sector.

Table 1 Types of industries which participated in the survey

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Banking / Finance	11.1%	4
Mining / Cement / Paper	2.8%	1
Electricity / Oil / Power	13.9%	5
Legal / Consulting / Advisory services	16.7%	6
Food / Beverage	5.6%	2
Healthcare	2.8%	1
Retail sales	8.3%	3
Agricultural / farming / grocery	2.8%	1
Hotel / Hospitality	8.3%	3
Manufacturing	8.3%	3
Other	19.4%	7

The employee size of participating companies was as diverse as the number of industries. The majority of respondents (52.8%) worked in companies which employed between 11 – 500 people, while 25% worked for companies employing between 501 – 5,000 people. Only three participants (8.3%) worked for large-scale corporations with more than 5,000 employees and only five (13.9%) worked for small-scale businesses with ten or less employees.

Most of the respondents (47.2%) indicated that their company was international or global in scope. Only six of 36 participants (16.7%) worked for companies within a national scope, equivalent to the number of participants working for regional companies. The rest of the participants (19.4%) worked for companies focused at the community and local levels.

3.2. Environmental Outreach

Participants were asked whether their company is involved in any environmental outreach projects, to which 21 of 32 respondents (65.6%) stated that their company was involved and nine (28.1%) were not. Two respondents were unclear while four participants skipped the question.

The 21 respondents who confirmed their employer’s involvement in environmental outreach projects and the two respondents who were not sure about their company’s outreach efforts were also asked to specify the types of environmental outreach projects in which their employer is involved in. Their responses, shown in Table 2 below, indicate a preference among the participating companies for energy and environmental footprint issues (i.e., improving resource utilization efficiencies), followed closely by ecosystem restoration and financial support for environmental programs.

Table 2 Types of environmental outreach projects implemented by participating businesses

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Ecosystem restoration (i.e., Reforestation / tree planting)	47.8%	11
Agricultural	13.0%	3
Marine / Coastal / Water-related	21.7%	5
Conservation-related	34.8%	8
Plant genetic research / technology	4.3%	1
Financial support or donations in support of environmental programs or agencies	43.5%	10
Environmental impact (i.e., shrinking the energy usage / company footprint)	69.6%	16
Climate change and biodiversity	21.7%	5
Other	26.1%	6

3.3. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Of the 32 participants who responded to a question on the presence of CSR within their organization, 23 (71.9%) indicated their organization has a CSR program while six (18.8%) did not. Pressed to indicate the two main thematic priorities of their CSR program, most respondents indicate a higher preference placed upon thematic areas with a social development aspect such as sustainable development (56%) or education and job skills training (50%). Table 3 lists the two highest priorities of participating companies’ CSR programs.

Table 3 Main priorities of CSR programs within participating businesses

Answer Options	%	Response Count
Sustainable development	56%	10
Education and job skills training for local people	50%	9
Environmental enhancement, improvement or restoration / Agriculture / Conservation	44%	8
Poverty reduction	22%	4
Preservation of local culture / historical sites	6%	1
Not sure	6%	1
Community infrastructure improvement	0%	0
Other	11%	2

4. Conclusion

With the understanding of environmental outreach and CSR based on the research findings above, many answers are reached with respect to the questions posed at the introduction (section 1).

Are Thai businesses engaging in environmental outreach projects which could contribute to national implementation of the CBD?

Yes; 65.6% of participating companies are engaged in environmental outreach projects.

If so, what are the most common thematic areas of engagement?

The lessening of environmental impacts (i.e., energy footprint), reforestation and ecosystems restoration, and financial support for environmental programs are the most commonly cited types of outreach which businesses engaged in.

Are Thai businesses embracing CSR, and if so, are they focusing their efforts on environmental issues or social development?

Yes; 71.9% of participating businesses have a CSR program, focusing on both environmental and social issues but with a slight preference for the latter.

These results provide a way for public sector stakeholders such as government agencies to improve their collaborative efforts with the private sector towards implementation of the CBD. By focusing on those issues which companies address already in their outreach efforts (i.e., energy efficiency, reforestation) instead of low priority areas (i.e., genetic research, biotechnology, agriculture), government agencies may improve the likelihood of finding a partner from the business community. If social issues such as sustainable development, education and training into environmental programs, this may also make such programs more attractive to the private sector to engage in via mechanisms like CSR.

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6. References

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