

MY SAY: CSR - corruptible social responsibility?

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Queen Elizabeth II has decided to omit leading figures associated with the financial world from her New Year's honours list in view of their alleged role in the current economic crisis.

The palace says: "When millions of families are struggling to keep their homes and many people live in fear of losing their jobs, it would be unjust to dole out honours to rich bankers." The honours system must reflect the moods of the times as well as public opinion, it adds.

And so, the Queen may not be amused to find out who gets what at one Annual Corporate Report Awards held here recently. This event might not have been as prestigious, but millions of Malaysian families are also struggling like their British counterparts.

What boggles the mind is that a tobacco company gives the impression (in a special event pullout) that it won the corporate social responsibility (CSR) award (supported by a picture) at the said event. In a CSR-focused interview, the company claimed that its CSR Charter is "aligned to the CSR framework launched by Bursa Malaysia Bhd as a guideline for public listed companies".

The company is allegedly guided by the values of transparency, accountability, integrity and good corporate governance. And it says it continues to communicate to a wide range of stakeholders through the social report! In all, as blazoned across the pullout, it says: "We walk the talk when it comes to CSR", and ambitiously projects itself as a benchmark company in CSR.

Unfortunately, just days before the blitz, an international news report exposed how cigarette companies mischievously employ "covert tactics" in Asia. Separate studies conducted by researchers in prestigious universities and research institutes in Thailand, Australia, the UK and the US suggest that tobacco companies have tried to undermine anti-smoking policies in Asia in a campaign to shift the focus away from the dangers of smoking.

At times, contrabands are used, clandestinely, and contrary to the company's complaints, these are meant to build market presence, in competition with other brands. Details of these reports are presented online in the authoritative Public Library of Science (PLoS) Medicine journal.

As expected, the knee-jerk response of the company is denial, but confidential documents of the tobacco companies have revealed such activities and more. They even reveal attempts to subvert efforts by World Health Organisation (WHO) to reduce smoking. In Asia, given many smokers are less aware and poorly educated, the situation is grave.

Indeed, an epidemiologist with WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative says: "The WHO regrets the unethical behaviour of tobacco companies that infiltrate research organisations to influence the research process and the findings of such organisations."

We have not even begun to talk about the premature loss of human lives by the millions annually, which is what "corporate social responsibility" must ultimately address, let alone the fact that increasingly, younger people are being induced to smoke, especially in developing countries like Malaysia. What about the millions of others who are suffering from tobacco-related diseases? All these are within the realm of corporate social responsibility that companies must be evaluated on.

This is where one hopes values of transparency, accountability and integrity are closely adhered to, especially when death attributed to corporate activities is involved. Stakeholders should be sensitive to how companies "waste" human lives to boost the bottom line. To do otherwise would be socially irresponsible, unless values of transparency and integrity are intended just for show and are glossed over in practice.

Indeed, how and where exactly is the death toll reported in relation to the profit and loss statement in the award-winning Annual Corporate Report? Doesn't the "loss" of lives deserve to be highlighted too, more so than the gain and loss in monetary terms?

Thus, the Queen is exemplary in taking a firm stand to ensure human lives and sufferings are not brushed aside in justifying awards as part of the social impact and responsibility. In other words, the company that fails to protect human lives knowing full well that products such as tobacco kill must be held fully accountable rather than rewarded!

Otherwise, as it stands, doling out an award to such a company is tantamount to accepting all those misgivings and remaining oblivious to the highly publicised tobacco-induced human sufferings.

This further underscores the message that the millions of Malaysian families who are now struggling, triggered by the demise of their loved ones as a result of tobacco use, are irrelevant to the context of so-called "excellence" accorded to the company. This is worse if one desires to be the CSR benchmark company, unless CSR is reduced to corruptible social responsibility, in stark contrast to global public opinion and ethics and clearly out of sync with the moods of the times. This, of course, makes nonsense out of CSR.

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