

Does your brand walk its CSR talk?

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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The Sustainability, Enterprise and Responsibility Awards, otherwise known as The SERAS CSR Awards Africa, is an annual event that recognises the contributions of corporate Africa in transforming our collective society for the better. The theme for 2017, Transformational Sustainability: From Social Responsibility to Social Impact, aims to challenge corporates to ensure their social responsibility investments yield real-world results. Along with the awards, The SERAS publishes an annual CSR report which entails a comprehensive survey of all the projects entered.

This #CSIMonth, founder of The SERAS [Ken Egbas](#) shares with us a brief history on the awards programme. He also unpacks some of its most significant impacts on the African CSR landscape, and explains the importance of authenticity and transparency in this space.



Ken Egbas, founder of The SERAS

The SERAS has a long history - how has it evolved over that time in keeping pace with an advancing CSR landscape across Africa?

Ken Egbas: It has truly been an interesting journey. First, the idea was borne out of an urgent need to document investment in corporate social responsibility and sustainability in Nigeria. The problem in Africa generally is not that we don't have the abundance of resources sufficient to meet our needs, but we have a major problem with proper documentation. And because we don't adequately document, reviews are not as thorough because until you document, the gaps are hard to spot and measurement of progress or impacts becomes nearly impossible.

We actually put together an initial twenty-year strategic plan. In the first four years, we were just going to allow organisations bring to the table everything it was they were doing in this area. Whether they were of high standards or not did not matter. We first sought to create a realisation of what the preferred future would be like, then from the fifth year, we went into standardisation and getting participating organisations to see best global practices and make them understand that to aspire to something greater would only do their businesses more good.

I can tell you that, in the process, we have had wonderful best practice stories coming out of the continent and, in same vein, this has encouraged numerous other organisations to embark on this journey towards a better world by first ensuring the communities in or around which we operate can attest to facts that life has become better because of the presence of corporates. This is how we laid it out. And if you ask me, eleven years later, I can only confirm to you that we have remained on course to perfecting that platform that supports the efforts of multinational organs such as the UN and AU to ensure even development across Africa, working with corporate organisations, government institutions, civil societies, regulators and all levels of stakeholders.

From a project that began in Lagos, Nigeria in 2007 to one that at the tenth edition began to witness participation from other countries on the continent, I think we have not fared badly. Hopefully, the next five years of our evolution would see other continents coming to learn from how we have used this to lift millions out of poverty and promote new ideas and innovations, so the world can see that Africa has something tangible and meaningful to offer the world.



2017 SERAS CSR Awards now open

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▣ ***What do you think has been the most significant impact of the SERAS since its inception?***

Egbas: I would say the most significant impacts are two-fold. Firstly, we created a platform that celebrates and accentuates those organisations getting it right so that others can learn from their experience. Over the last ten years we have seen more and more organisations move from testing the temperature of the sustainability water with their toes, and gaining the confidence to dive in and begin their own particular journeys.

The second part would be that from encouraging more organisations to get involved and enjoy the difference they are making in society, we now see many of them committing huge financial and human resources to sustainability and CSR. In Nigeria, for example, this reality saw the aggregated funds from the top one hundred companies quoted on the Nigerian Stock Exchange skyrocket by over 1000% between 2007 and 2014. We hope to see the same trend in other countries in Africa as well.

▣ ***Could you describe the CSR programme assessment process, how thorough it is, and what it takes to win a SERAS award?***

Egbas: The assessment process is quite simple. It begins every year with an announcement of the theme for the year. Talking about the theme, in our strategic outlay, from 2007 till date, every theme that has been chosen has been intended to continue from wherever the one for the previous year ended. This way, we are helping to add depth to what organisations do, and use the next to push them towards breaking new frontiers.

This is followed by a call for entry process that is well publicised and the criteria for assessment made public as well. After this, there is the deadline for submission and subsequently, the entries are processed based on the categories entered for by the organisations and a semi-final list of six organisations per category is made by the judges committee. The judges

committee consists of eight individuals, and the president is chosen from amongst them. They have a two-year tenure which may be renewed. For 2017-2018, we have a new crop of judges on the committee, presided over by an American who has done loads of work in CSR and sustainability and is globally reckoned with. Her name is Deborah Leipziger and she authored the United Nations code book on social responsibility.

Then we go on the verification exercises. This happens to be the most interesting part and perhaps what stands us out from all other awards of this nature. The verification process sees an independent process of collection of videos, photographs, interviews with communities and other stakeholders that seek to validate the entries and claims made by participants. This is submitted and the president of the jury fixes another sitting where the committee, which is made of very credible and knowledgeable people drawn from Africa, Europe and America, review evidences and reduce each category to the best three per category. It is at this stage, one month to the awards, that the list of the final nominees are made public. The judges committee meet one last time, usually the week of the awards, to vote and decide on winners. These winners are announced at the glamorous and excitement-filled awards ceremony. All these processes can be followed online at www.theseras.com.

■ ***Tell us about a CSR campaign that has stood out for you over the years as a truly impactful initiative.***

Egbas: There have been several over the years, but perhaps for the sake of this conversation I could mention the most recent one - the 2016 awards cycle. We had Investec Bank's entry in the area of Clean and Affordable Energy. It was truly riveting and very innovative and something you would like to see across the continent. There was also the one by Netcare South Africa in the category of Good Health and Wellbeing. The impacts and the visuals were mind-blowing. From Nigeria, we saw an exceptional sustainability report submitted by Access Bank. These three immediately come to mind.

■ ***Now and into the future, consumers have growing expectations from the businesses they patronise in terms of CSR. Why do you think this trend has developed and do you believe it's here to stay?***

Egbas: Definitely, this trend is here with us for the next 150 years or even longer until some other ideals buck it. Something bucking it I really doubt though. Value proposition from the companies to consumers has changed a lot over the last few decades. We have witnessed the eruption of three major waves over the last century. First we had the wave of marketing, then advertising, then followed by the wave that has seen the rise of consumerism.

The last wave, in my opinion, birthed the CSR and sustainability movement. In these periods, consumers have grown to know more of their rights, they have developed the uncanny ability to cut through the clutter and sometimes deceptions of advertising, and are asking more of companies or brands who they no longer see as abstracts but as human beings that they would like to connect more deeply with, well beyond the products or services that these organisations offer. They want to know how the vision of these companies connect with the touted value propositions, and how these propositions connect with finding lasting solutions to the myriad issues facing the world today. They want to know where an organisation stands when it comes to child labour, girl-child education, environment, equitable distribution of resources and opportunities and alleviation of poverty and so on. When they can establish these, brand loyalty becomes a forgone conclusion.

I can confidently state that this is the new frontier for brand differentiation, and I would love to go a step further to predict that over the next two decades, brands that master this trend would lead the various sectors and this would help create the hotbed for innovative products and solutions.

■ ***How important is authenticity and transparency in the CSI space in Africa?***

Egbas: Authenticity and transparency are indeed key when we look at corporate social investments or corporate social responsibility in Africa. Without transparency and authenticity, there cannot be accountability or credibility. In the not so distant past, organisations came into the fold seeing every other organisation as competition. And because of this, they found it near impossible to open up and share their thoughts and ideas.

Now, many are beginning to arrive at the understanding that though they might compete for market share when dealing in brands and products offerings, to gain buy-ins from a public that is largely distrustful of them and gain mindshare, they

would have to collaborate more to deal with problems as a united force for good than the force of one. I believe this is also what the UN sort to promote when they came up with the public-private partnership (PPP) model to drive development in the under-developed parts of the world.

I can also link this to what we do at The SERAS CSR Awards Africa. Credibility and transparency is at the core of all we do. I believe this is why we have continued to enjoy the support and confidence of our participants, partners, sponsors and all others who have had any interactions with the awards. This is not to say we are perfect. But every year, we learn some lessons and seek to improve and perfect our systems over the next cycle.

■ ***Many African countries struggled in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. If we are to see greater positive outcomes in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals, what sort of role does the private sector need to play?***

Egbas: The fact that many African nations failed to meet the Millennium Development Goals that ended in 2015 is one stark reality that helped us gird up our loins and become more determined than ever to ensure the continued success of The SERAS and its role in ensuring and gently pushing organisations to adopt the ethos of sustainability and commitment to ensuring a better world, and to provide solutions that would lift millions from poverty and deprivation. When you aggregate the total score from Africa and divide by the number of nations, what you find at the end is that Africa as a continent only scored 20%! You had countries like Nigeria with a population of approximately 180 million being able to meet only one of nine goals.

When we talk of the roles of private sector, I believe their contribution is key to the potential success of the SDGs. The African narrative globally has been one of war, famine, unbridled corruption, cluelessness of leadership, near disregard for science, inability to plan etc. But in these same environments, we have had businesses that grew from nothing to becoming billionaires in dollars and pounds sterling denominations. Today, the continent boasts of several billionaires from the various regions of the continent who have built huge industries.

As such, my conclusion is that there is nothing wrong with the geographical entity called Africa. There is only a lot wrong with how we think. If we can get those who have successfully created and traded values for good benefits and have grown these huge and highly profitable entities through hard work and taking advantage of several opportunities available... if only we can bring these people who thrive on risk and accountability to sit with those who superintend over the public sector, and get each to plough according to their strengths, Africa would become the cynosure of global eyes.

The SERAS has extended the deadline for entries until 31 July. For more info, go to www.theseras.com.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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