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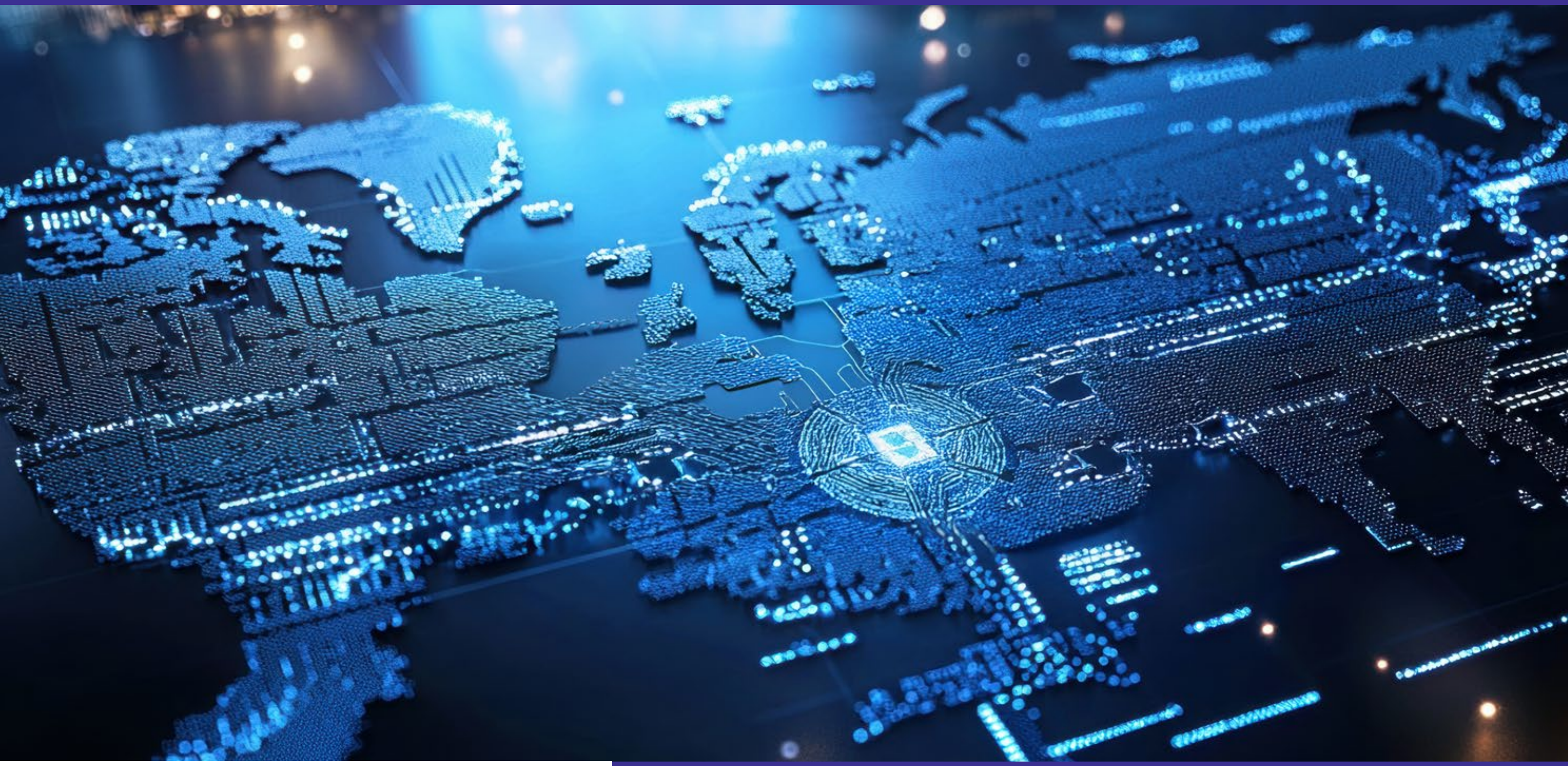

LIGHTS - Geopolitics

A community-based case study from the Philippines: How transformational Corporate Social Responsibility can create long-term social impact and inclusive business growth

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A community-based case study from the Philippines: How transformational Corporate Social Responsibility can create long-term social impact and inclusive business growth

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Abstract

In the Philippines, sari-sari stores and carinderias are not just microenterprises but key community hubs with untapped potential to improve nutrition. This study explores how corporations can adopt a transformational Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) approach, and move beyond compliance, to create shared value through partnerships with community-based food providers. Based on mixed-methods research in the Greater Manila area, the paper identifies key barriers and enablers for nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions. We introduce a three-pillar framework: Capability Support, Demand Generation, and Strategic Partnerships, to guide corporations toward scalable, sustainable collaborations that enhance public health while generating business value. The paper also explores how emerging technologies, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI), can be ethically applied to improve CSR deployment and empower local entrepreneurs, using low-bandwidth, accessible digital tools tailored to community contexts. This approach contributes to managerial and policy discussions on ESG, food systems, and social innovation, offering a replicable model for corporate actors seeking to engage with local nutrition ecosystems in a meaningful, responsible business leadership manner for long-term societal impact.

Keywords: *Social impact, community-based, responsible leadership.*

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**This paper is co-authored with AHA! Behavioral Design collaborators and based on our current work on national strategies on Social Behaviour Change to alleviate malnutrition and early childhood development.

Community-based case study from the Philippines: How transformational Corporate Social Responsibility can create long-term social impact and inclusive business growth

Introduction

At twelve noon, the *barangays* - Filipino villages, come alive. Local food vendors known as *carinderias*, with pride etched on their faces, begin to unveil an array of pots and pans, that brim with home-cooked dishes and familiar, fragrant air of local delicacies. In every corner, the rhythm of the day shifts. Families and neighbours gather on extended front porches and gardens, forming small clusters of conversation and laughter. Plates are passed, stories are shared, and the comforting clatter of utensils mingles with the bustle of chatter. This time of the day in the Philippines, and like in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, is more than a meal - it is a ritual, a time for togetherness, a pause in the day to reconnect.

Nearby, the sari-sari stores, small neighbourhood kiosks - hum with life. Brightly coloured packets of snacks and essentials hang from strings like festive decorations, waiting to be picked up in small, affordable portions. The community-based sari-sari stores and carinderias are vital food providers that are critical enablers of local food and beverage consumption for families living in low-income communities. With an estimated 1.3 million sari-sari stores nationwide, that contribute significantly to the economy, generating almost ₱8 billion ($140 million) annually, their societal value is immense (Lu, 2024; Talavera, 2024).

These community-based food providers are not just places to shop. They are community hubs, where social connection and entrepreneurial spirits can thrive and create positive consumption habits. Thus, carinderias and sari-sari stores have the potential to act as nutritional gatekeepers and catalysts for improving health and wellbeing. Despite their significant community presence, the potential of community-based food providers to collaborate with other nutrition stakeholders, such as with corporates remains underutilised. These hubs form vital pulses in the communities, in a country with a population size of 114.9 million people, and which is further projected to grow by 17% by 2050 (UNDESA, 2022). Corporate efforts prioritising nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions are currently very limited in the Philippines. Traditional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the country has largely remained philanthropic, focusing on project-based donations, disaster relief, and business literacy programs.

These efforts, while useful, do not leverage the full strategic potential of CSR as envisioned by shared value theorists like Porter and Kramer (2011). Transformational CSR is value-driven, that emphasises the creation of shared value, beyond the goal of pure profit maximisation. And in contrast, integrates business strategy with societal improvement, creating multi-impact and inclusive business growth outcomes. Addressing the gap between community-based food providers and strategic corporate partnerships through transformational CSR, offers a pathway for businesses to support community health wellbeing, by creating shared value that will lead to alleviating societal challenges, and thus generating a positive impact on the community, as well as social value in the long-term.

However, transformational CSR strategies do not exist in silo. One major challenge often overlooked is the deep-rooted presence of multinational food and beverage companies in underserved communities and the strong brand royalty within the barangays. These corporations, driven by sophisticated distribution models and substantial marketing budgets, have effectively positioned low-cost, highly processed products as default food choices in many urban and rural areas. Their influence is extensive, shaping dietary preferences and reinforcing patterns of unhealthy consumption, if left unchecked. As such, any corporate-led initiative aiming to reshape food environments must acknowledge this competitive landscape. Ignoring it risks underestimating the resistance from existing commercial interests that benefit from maintaining the status quo.

To counterbalance this, companies seeking to engage in authentic nutrition-focused CSR should explore long-term coalition-building efforts with public health actors, regulatory bodies, and civil society organisations to advocate for healthier defaults in retail spaces. This could include pushing for voluntary reformulation, front-of-pack labelling, or ethical limits on marketing to children, especially in settings such as the Philippines, where regulation is limited. It also underscores the importance of ensuring that CSR does not serve merely as a marketing exercise, but is embedded in core business practice and aligned with broader food systems transformation.

A Nation 's Triple-Nutritional Challenge

The Philippines faces a triple burden of malnutrition. Persistent undernutrition, rising overweight and obesity, and widespread micronutrient deficiencies. These overlapping issues reflect deeper systemic failures in food systems, socio-economic inequality, public health infrastructure, and dietary education. Undernutrition, particularly among children under five, remains a major concern. Micronutrient deficiencies remain endemic. Iron-deficiency anaemia is still prevalent among women of reproductive age and children under five, despite government supplementation programs. Vitamin A deficiency, while reportedly declining due to supplementation campaigns, still affects pockets of the population in rural and underserved areas. Iodine deficiency, addressed largely through the Universal Salt Iodization Program, has also persisted in certain regions due to inconsistent monitoring and enforcement (World Bank, 2021).

The country's persistent nutrition crisis deeply affects family health and well-being, especially those from low-income backgrounds. However, these vitamin deficiencies can be effectively addressed and with low-costs interventions through multi-sectorial collaborations, as the example of Unilever and their brand Knorr highlighted. Unilever launched a campaign, in which they fortified the widely popular cooking ingredient, a bouillon cube, with iron to address anaemia in young women in Nigeria where half of the women in reproductive ages are identified as iron-deficient (Sydibe, 2020).

Another growing concern is the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity, particularly among school-aged children and adolescents. There is a troubling upward trend in these demographics, largely attributed to increased consumption of highly processed foods, sedentary lifestyles, and a decline in physical activity. As urbanisation accelerates, dietary patterns have shifted significantly from traditional staples to energy-dense, nutrient-poor options. This nutritional transition is contributing to early onset of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including type 2 diabetes and hypertension, adding additional complexity to the country’s nutrition burden.

This is particularly alarming when the majority of the population’s age demographics will be in the 30–65-years old bracket by 2050, further straining the already stretched healthcare systems (UNDESA, 2022). Families battling malnutrition often face a vicious cycle of poor health, reduced economic productivity, and persistent poverty. Poor maternal nutrition before and during pregnancy contributes to low birth weights and higher infant mortality, perpetuating health disparities across generations. Children from food-insecure households are particularly vulnerable to developmental delays, lower school performance, and long-term health complications.

Community-based Food Vendors are undervalued Nutrition Enablers.

Community food vendors, particularly sari-sari stores and carinderias, are uniquely positioned as frontline actors in everyday food consumption. One of the most significant structural challenges remains the fragmented food system in the country, which contributes to poor diet diversity and food insecurity. In urban areas, the nutritional challenges are amplified where affordable nutritious food is often inaccessible to the poorest populations, driving reliance on unhealthy processed food options.

Community-level engagement remains inconsistent. LGUs (Local Government Units) with strong political will and support from civil society partners have often outperformed others in addressing nutrition-related challenges. However, many LGUs still lack capacity to effectively manage multi sectoral nutrition programs, despite having mandates to do so.

Business, and particularly Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies that support the awareness, or service integration efforts for nutrition is relatively unique in relation to other social impact and sustainability efforts, in the context of the Philippines. Additionally, it can help corporations position themselves as responsible leaders especially given the increasing regulatory and reputational risks to the industry, due to their impacts on public health and the environment (O'Hearn et al., 2022; Onagan et al., 2018).

Community-based food vendors, including sari-sari stores and carinderias, often prioritise affordable, high-demand products over healthier options. The food environment itself is problematic, with processed and calorie-dense items dominating local markets, making nutritious choices less accessible to families. However, recent data from sari-saris and carinderias in the Greater Manila Area show a positive attitude towards sustainable practices, with over 60% already implementing waste management, or efforts to reduce food waste.

As part of a large-scale national nutrition programme in the Philippines, research conducted in the Greater Manila Area examined how corporations could improve nutritional outcomes by partnering with community-based food vendors. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrated behavioural insights from key informant interviews (KIIs) with data from surveys conducted on sari-sari store and carinderia owners. The findings highlighted the potential role of these vendors in implementing both nutrition-specific interventions, which address immediate dietary determinants, and nutrition-sensitive interventions, which tackle underlying systemic factors influencing nutrition (Escher et al., 2024).

The participant profile revealed a predominantly female group (69.7%) engaged in microenterprise, with most respondents aged between 36 and 45 years. Nearly half were single (48.5%), and a significant portion supplemented their sari-sari store or carinderia income with other employment sources (54.5%). Business experience was generally limited, as the majority had been operating for fewer than five years, with 30.3% in business for less than a year. This profile suggests a relatively young, female-driven entrepreneurial segment balancing multiple income sources and early-stage business ventures.

This presents a great opportunity for corporates to support female vendors and thus accelerate female entrepreneurship equity, while providing overall support for community-based food vendors. Furthermore, this provides corporates with a strategic entry point not only because of their reach and the subsequent gaps discussed, but also because of the overall lack of representation of nutrition in Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) efforts (O'Hearn et al., 2022).

While evidence shows that community-based food providers are interested in implementing nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions, they report several barriers around their ability to perform the necessary behaviours, and pro-healthy nutrition provision. Despite interest in promoting healthier choices, sari-saris and carinderias face financial and cognitive barriers. High capital requirements discourage efforts to integrate nutrition, and many vendors feel they lack the necessary knowledge. Yet, when support is framed as a given, such as providing free communication materials or offering discounts on healthier products, vendors show increased willingness to participate. Corporations can bridge these gaps by integrating support systems that reduce financial strain and improve knowledge dissemination that are strengthened by behavioural intervention principles.

Managerial and policy recommendations

Corporate engagement with community-based food providers offers a strategic opportunity to address malnutrition while creating shared value and evolve towards a more transformational CSR and responsible leadership strategy. However, corporations must look beyond traditional CSR activities, and explore partnerships that align to their own business activities and leverage those to adapt to the local, cultural context to empower enablers that are already present across the communities. A few principles of action that could help corporates to empower community-based food providers as community-level agents of nutrition advocacy and implementation, include three critical pillars: *Capability Support, Demand Generation, and Strategic Value-based Partnerships*. These pillars combined, reflect an interactive and dynamic framework to effectively overcome ability-based barriers and enable sustainable health-focused economic practices:

1. Capability Support focuses on equipping informal food providers with the necessary resources and tools to participate meaningfully in nutrition interventions.

Enhancing the capacity of informal food providers requires a comprehensive yet practical approach. Financial enablement is key, reducing cost barriers through product discounts, seed capital access, and bundled purchasing schemes that lower the risks of adopting healthier inventory. Equally important is the provision of ready-made, context-specific communication tools, such as posters, flyers, and health materials, that reinforce messages and create visual cues supporting informed choices in store environments. Training should be modular, lightweight, and tailored to low-resource settings, ensuring accessibility. In communities with limited digital access, AI-driven SMS support or offline-first training apps can extend reach and relevance.

Together, these efforts enable informal vendors to gain the skills and confidence to promote nutritious recipes and food preparation practices, positioning them as proactive agents of local health.

2. Demand Generation by stimulating consumer interest and behaviour change, is about ensuring that healthier offerings are not just available, but also desirable and economically viable.

To drive demand for nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive products among community-based food providers, companies must leverage their influence through corporate role modelling, by integrating healthy products into their marketing, packaging, and CSR efforts. This visible commitment legitimises healthier choices and encourages smaller retailers to follow suit. Partnering on marketing initiatives, such as co-branded promotions and aligned advertising, amplifies behaviour change and reinforces the value of nutritious options at the point of sale. Building consumer confidence remains key, supported by public awareness campaigns, consistent product availability, and incentives like trials or guarantees to address uncertainty around demand.

Together, these strategies help retailers adopt healthier stock and foster a stronger local market for nutritious food.

3. Strategic Value-based Partnerships is the pillar that ties together government, corporate, and community collaboration towards shared-value creation to anchor nutrition efforts in sustainable ecosystems.

Strengthening strategic partnerships is essential to scaling nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions in community-based retail. Corporate-retailer alliances can simplify supply chains by linking FMCG companies directly with local vendors, reducing costs and improving access to nutritious products. Government support, especially from LGUs and barangays, is also vital. These bodies provide regulatory frameworks, infrastructure (i.e., hygiene-friendly store layouts), and trusted community engagement. Equally important is empowering informal food providers as nutrition champions. With recognition and support, these vendors can co-develop programs, share success stories, and influence healthier behaviours in their communities.

This tri-sectoral collaboration, between corporates, governments, and communities ensures that nutrition efforts are both scalable and socially grounded.

All three pillars are mutually reinforcing. *Strengthened capabilities* improve readiness to participate, *demand generation* validates these efforts economically, *strategic value-based partnerships* provide structure and longevity. When integrated effectively, this framework enables community-based food providers to evolve from passive sellers to proactive agents of nutritional wellbeing. This provides businesses the opportunity to join forces and play an important role in bridging the gap between national nutrition goals and everyday consumer behaviour.

Emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), can enhance these efforts when deployed ethically. For example, AI-driven data analytics can help identify local dietary patterns, enabling tailored product bundling or targeted health messaging for sari-sari stores. Chatbots and mobile platforms, powered by natural language processing, can deliver real-time nutrition education or business support in local dialects. Predictive modelling can improve supply chain efficiency, reducing waste and improving access to healthier foods. Importantly, such applications must be transparent, community-informed, and designed with safeguards to avoid misuse or exclusion.

Corporations have both the resources and reach to influence food environments, shape demand, and support behaviour change. However, in the implementation of transformational CSR, potential risks may arise if left unchecked. First, informal vendors often operate under precarious economic conditions and may deprioritise nutrition initiatives when faced with more immediate financial pressures. Second, aligning corporate timelines with the slower, trust-based pace of community partnerships can be challenging, particularly when business metrics prioritise short-term returns. Mission drift is also a concern, where corporate strategies may shift focus from social goals to profitability as market conditions change. Without safeguards, interventions risk becoming marketing-led rather than impact-driven.

Furthermore, power imbalances in multi-stakeholder partnerships pose additional challenges. While collaboration with government units and community-based actors is essential, corporations may dominate the agenda due to their financial leverage and operational capacity. This can marginalise local voices or lead to superficial engagement that undermines trust and long-term success.

Mitigating these risks requires humility, long-term commitment, and adaptive learning. Corporations ought to co-create solutions with local stakeholders, invest in participatory design processes, and embed monitoring systems that track both social and commercial outcomes. These principles, combined with the three pillars presented here, can help businesses effectively implement this framework, and navigate complexity while ensuring that CSR initiatives remain equitable, authentic, and impactful.

Conclusion

The Philippines' progress on nutrition and wellbeing has been marked by both encouraging developments and enduring challenges. Successes such as legislative reforms, and targeted community programs provide a foundation to build upon. Yet, persistent malnutrition, rising obesity, and systemic inequalities in food access underscore the need for a more ambitious, coordinated, and sustained response by strategic multi-sectoral actors.

By leveraging a behavioural lens to enhance nutritional wellbeing, and aligning social responsibility with community needs, businesses not only enhance public health but also strengthen their brand reputation and social license to operate. The interactive and dynamic framework presented here, provides a starting point for companies who endeavour to evolve towards transformational CSR activities that move beyond compliance, towards fostering sustainable change through community-based collaborations with local food providers.

Corporations willing to invest in community-driven nutrition initiatives can create lasting impact, positioning themselves as leaders in responsible business leadership, thus gaining a strategic advantage while fostering long-term social impact. When implemented responsibly, AI can amplify these efforts, enhancing precision in targeting, scaling community outreach, and improving coordination between stakeholders. Crucially, ethical AI deployment requires inclusive design, transparent governance, and a focus on accessibility, especially in underserved areas with low digital infrastructure. By designing low-bandwidth or offline-first tools, companies can ensure technology empowers local actors rather than reinforcing existing digital divides.

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