



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



From fragmentation to coordination: Rethinking corporate social responsibility for national development in the Gambia

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Abstract

In The Gambia, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) often feels like pieces of a puzzle that don't quite fit together - well-intentioned but scattered, poorly tracked, and disconnected from what the country really needs. While bigger countries have turned CSR into a well-oiled machine, The Gambia's approach remains largely informal, with companies often focusing on flashy one-off donations rather than tackling fundamental development challenges.

I'm exploring how we might create a bridge between corporate giving and The Gambia's national development goals, specifically looking at the National Development Plan [NDP 2018-2021] and the newer Green Recovery-Focused National Development Plan [RF-NDP 2023-2027]. My focus is on the areas where CSR could make the biggest difference: healthcare, education, farming, clean energy, small business support, and digital infrastructure.

Looking through the lens of established business and social impact theories, I've identified several key roadblocks: minimal oversight, no standardized way to measure results, and no central system to track CSR projects. I'm proposing three main solutions: creating a central database of CSR activities, requiring standard reporting methods, and establishing a "CSR & Shared Value Council" that brings together both public and private voices.

Real-world examples tell the story: Africell Gambia's GMD 12 million COVID-19 response, Trust Bank's ongoing support for schools and hospitals, and Gamtel/Gamcel's various national contributions show the potential impact of private sector giving. However, these efforts, while valuable, highlight the need for better coordination. Recent U.S. Department of State reports [2023, 2024] confirm that while companies are engaging in CSR, it's still voluntary and somewhat haphazard. I argue that bringing structure and coordination to CSR efforts would not only make better use of resources but also help deliver services more fairly, build public confidence, and move us closer to The Gambia's Vision 2050 goals.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; Coordination Mechanisms; National Development Plan; Essential Services; Productive Sectors; Governance Frameworks; The Gambia; Lean Six Sigma

1. Introduction

Having spent considerable time studying The Gambia's corporate landscape, I've observed how corporate social responsibility [CS] could serve as a vital complement to government spending in this small West African nation - if only it were better aligned with the country's development goals. Currently, CSR initiatives in The Gambia feel like scattered pieces of a puzzle that don't quite fit together. Most companies stick to the basics: donating to charities, sponsoring local sports teams, or providing emergency relief when disaster strikes. Meanwhile, crucial areas like healthcare, education, farming, clean energy, and digital growth often get overlooked.

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Looking at the major CSR players, you'll find state-owned companies like Gamtel/Gamcel and NAWEC leading some initiatives, alongside private banks such as Trust Bank Gambia, Guaranty Trust Bank (Gambia) Ltd., and Ecobank Gambia. The telecom sector, particularly Africell and QCell, has also stepped up with significant contributions. Yet these efforts rarely sync with the government's broader vision laid out in development plans like the NDP 2018-2021 and the Recovery-Focused NDP 2023-2027, which emphasize building an inclusive, resilient, and sustainable economy.

Without proper coordination, I've noticed resources often go to waste - companies might duplicate each other's efforts in one area while leaving other regions and sectors completely untouched. It's also nearly impossible to measure how these CSR activities actually impact national development since there's no system to track and evaluate outcomes.

Problem Statement

The current state of CSR in The Gambia reminds me of an orchestra playing without a conductor - each company doing its own thing, often chasing publicity with one-time projects rather than creating lasting change. This disconnected approach means missing out on opportunities to make a real difference in the country's development.

Aim

This research seeks to create a practical framework for coordinating CSR efforts in The Gambia, ensuring they align with the National Development Plan [NDP] and direct resources where they're needed most - whether that's essential services or key economic sectors.

1.1. Paper Structure

Let me passionately walk you through how this paper is organized. It flows through fifteen key sections, starting with the basics and building toward practical recommendations:

I begin with an Abstract that gives you the big picture - what I studied, why it matters, and what I found. The Introduction then sets the stage by explaining CSR in The Gambia and why aligning it with national development is crucial.

From there, I dived into our Research Questions and Objectives before exploring what others have already discovered in our Literature Review. This review covers everything from CSR in emerging economies to The Gambian context specifically.

The theoretical backbone comes next, where I examine relevant frameworks like Institutional and Stakeholder theories. My Methodology section explains my approach and why I chose it.

The meat of the paper starts with an in-depth look at CSR in The Gambia, followed by my proposed coordination model. I'll explore why this coordination matters and what we can learn from other African countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya.

The final sections get practical - discussing implications, implementation steps, and how to measure success. I wrap up by acknowledging the study's limitations and suggesting future research directions before concluding with key takeaways.

Each section builds on the previous ones, creating a comprehensive roadmap for improving CSR coordination in The Gambia. The structure allows readers to either follow the full journey or skip to sections most relevant to their interests.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

2.1. Research Questions

- To what extent do The Gambia's current CSR initiatives align with the country's National Development Plans [2018-2021, 2023-2027], and where do we see disconnects?
- What key systemic challenges are causing overlap and waste in CSR programs, and why aren't resources reaching communities effectively?
- How can we build stronger bridges between public and private sectors to make CSR work better for everyone involved?
- Which existing theories best explain and support the value of coordinated CSR efforts in The Gambian context?

- What practical oversight and reporting systems would work best in The Gambia, considering our unique business environment and cultural context?

Objectives

- Identify and analyse the critical gaps in communication and coordination that are currently fragmenting CSR efforts across the country
- Develop a practical coordination framework grounded in proven theoretical approaches and local realities
- Create user-friendly tools for implementation, including a centralized registry, standardized reporting methods, and a CSR Council structure
- Learn from successful CSR models in other African nations that share similar economic and social contexts
- Provide clear, actionable recommendations for government officials, business leaders, and community organizations

3. Literature Review

3.1. CSR in Emerging Economies

In developing nations, Corporate Social Responsibility [CSR] takes many forms - from simple charitable giving to more sophisticated programs that weave social impact into business strategy. Think of a company donating to the local school versus one that creates lasting educational partnerships. This matters especially in countries where government resources are stretched thin. When done right, CSR can help fill crucial gaps in public services.

Porter and Kramer's (2011) idea of Creating Shared Value [CSV] shows how this can work: businesses do better when they tackle social problems that directly affect their operations. In emerging economies, this makes perfect sense - issues like poor healthcare, limited education, unreliable power, and struggling firms don't just hurt communities; they hold businesses back too. Smart CSR addresses both challenges at once.

In The Gambia, like many African nations, most companies still stick to traditional charity. But there's growing recognition that they need to move toward more integrated approaches that complement, rather than replace, government efforts.

3.2. Coordination, Duplication, and Development Effectiveness

One of the biggest headaches in CSR across developing countries is that everyone's working in isolation. Without proper coordination, companies tend to flock to high-profile causes - like donating to urban schools or hospitals - while overlooking equally important needs in rural healthcare, renewable energy, or digital infrastructure [Moon, 2014].

This is why coordination is crucial. Kania and Kramer [2011] point out that when organizations share goals and metrics, they can avoid duplicate efforts and pool resources for bigger impact. Think of it like a central hub that maps out who's doing what, where. This makes it easier to spot areas getting too much attention - and those getting none at all.

Taking a coordinated approach also helps create lasting change. Instead of one company funding scholarships while another builds classrooms, they could work together to improve the entire education system. Unfortunately, The Gambia lacks this kind of platform, so companies often end up with disconnected projects that look good in press releases but don't address deeper needs.

3.3. National Planning Alignment

Just as international aid works best when it fits with a country's own plans, CSR should align with national development strategies. In The Gambia's case, that means connecting corporate initiatives to the National Development Plan [NDP] 2018-2021 and the Recovery-Focused NDP 2023-2027 [MoFEA, 2024].

This alignment brings clear benefits:

- **Policy coherence** - CSR projects support rather than duplicate government work
- **Resource leverage** - Companies can partner with public or donor-funded programs
- **Better tracking** - National systems can measure progress when private investments are part of the bigger picture

This is especially important in The Gambia, where data is often scarce. A CSR registry would help track how companies contribute to national goals. Without this alignment, CSR risks becoming more about marketing than meeting real community needs.

3.4. Reporting and Assurance Infrastructure

Trust in CSR depends heavily on good reporting and verification. While global standards like GRI [2021] and SASB exist, they can be overwhelming for smaller businesses, especially in developing economies.

For The Gambia, a simpler national reporting system might work better. This could include:

- Basic templates for companies to report their CSR spending and results
- A public database, managed by a government ministry, showing where and how CSR money is spent
- Independent verification by local accounting firms to check companies' claims

This would make it easier to compare different companies' efforts and prevent exaggerated claims about social impact. It would also help researchers and policymakers by providing reliable data.

3.5. The Gambian CSR Context

CSR in The Gambia is still finding its feet. Recent U.S. Department of State reports [2023, 2024] note that CSR isn't widely understood, with most companies limiting themselves to occasional charitable giving. Few organizations take a strategic approach, and reporting practices vary widely.

While the Gambia Competition and Consumer Protection Commission [GCCPC] oversees consumer rights and fair competition, it doesn't specifically regulate CSR. There's no official registry or national accounting of corporate social investments, which leaves CSR activities largely unstructured and unclear.

There are some bright spots - like Africell's GMD 12 million COVID-19 donation and Trust Bank Gambia's ongoing support for health and education. These examples show CSR's potential to support national priorities, but also highlight current limitations: impact isn't well documented or integrated into broader development planning.

4. Theoretical Framework

Let's explore how different theories help us understand CSR coordination in The Gambia:

4.1. Institutional Theory

When organizations operate in environments with clear rules and structures, they tend to make more strategic decisions [North, 1990]. However, in The Gambia, where formal CSR guidelines are lacking, companies often make decisions based on what looks good or what the leadership prefers, rather than what creates lasting impact. Think of it like trying to play a game without clear rules - players end up making up their own as they go along. By establishing proper frameworks like a national CSR registry and reporting standards, the government could help guide corporate behaviour toward meaningful development goals.

4.2. Stakeholder Theory

Freeman's Stakeholder Theory [1984] reminds us that successful CSR requires balancing everyone's needs - from local communities to employees to investors. Right now, in The Gambia, companies tend to focus on highly visible projects that generate good publicity, while overlooking less visible but equally important stakeholders like rural communities. Creating a formal CSR & Shared Value Council would give all these groups a seat at the table, ensuring CSR efforts reflect what the community actually needs rather than just what companies think they need.

4.3. Principal-Agent Theory

This theory highlights a common challenge: the gap between what the government/public wants [broad development] and what companies actually do with their CSR funds (often pursuing their own agenda). It's like having someone manage your money without really knowing how they're spending it. In The Gambia's case, better reporting requirements and oversight would help ensure CSR activities actually align with national development priorities.

4.4. Collective Impact / Network Governance

Kania and Kramer (2011) show us that tackling big social challenges requires coordinated effort. Their framework calls for:

- A central coordinating body
- Shared ways to measure success
- Activities that complement each other
- Continuous learning and improvement

For The Gambia, this means creating a national CSR platform that could track progress, connect different initiatives, and ensure resources are spread across different sectors. This would help move CSR from one-off projects to systematic solutions for issues like healthcare, education, or renewable energy.

Summarily, these theories point to one clear message: for CSR to truly make a difference in The Gambia, we need stronger institutions, better stakeholder engagement, more transparency, and coordinated action. Without these elements, CSR risks remaining a collection of scattered good deeds rather than a real force for sustainable development.

5. Methodology

As a single researcher, I've chosen a qualitative, theoretical, and literature-based approach to examine CSR coordination in The Gambia. This methodology allows me to analyse institutional gaps, evaluate alignment with national development goals, and develop a structured governance framework.

5.1. Research Design

My study takes a desk-based, analytical approach, focusing on synthesizing existing literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. I draw from multiple theoretical perspectives - Institutional Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Principal-Agent Theory, and Collective Impact frameworks - to identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing CSR coordination.

5.2. Data Sources

I've gathered data from several secondary sources:

- Academic literature: Research on CSR, shared value, governance, and coordination mechanisms from established databases [JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, ResearchGate]
- National policy documents: The Gambian National Development Plan [018-2021] and Recovery-Focused NDP [2023-2027], which outline national development priorities
- Institutional reports: Documentation from key regulatory bodies including the GCCPC, Central Bank of The Gambia, and Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs
- Supporting literature: U.S. Department of State Investment Climate Reports [2023, 2024], media coverage, and corporate CSR reports from Gambian companies

5.3. Analytical Approach

My analysis follows three main steps:

- Thematic analysis of CSR challenges, focusing on issues like fragmentation, redundancy, and misalignment with national goals
- Application of theoretical frameworks to understand institutional dynamics, stakeholder relationships, and coordination mechanisms
- Comparative analysis of CSR practices in similar African contexts [Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa] to derive applicable lessons for The Gambia

5.4. Justification of Methodology

This approach suits my research aims because it:

- Enables conceptual modelling of CSR coordination
- Facilitates comprehensive analysis of institutional relationships and policy alignment

- Allows me to draw practical insights from comparable contexts while working independently

5.5. Limitations

I acknowledge that relying on secondary sources limits access to current, detailed data about CSR activities in The Gambia. Specific financial data, geographic distribution, and sector-specific impacts may not be fully available. Future research through primary data collection would help validate my proposed framework and strengthen its recommendations.

6. The Gambian Context and CSR Patterns

6.1. Understanding CSR in The Gambia

The Gambia's approach to Corporate Social Responsibility [CSR] is still finding its feet, with no formal requirements for companies to report their social initiatives. While several institutions play important roles in the business landscape, none specifically oversee CSR activities:

The Gambia Competition and Consumer Protection Commission [GCCPC] focuses on fair market practices and consumer rights, but doesn't regulate social initiatives. The Central Bank mainly deals with financial oversight, and while the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs sets development priorities through national plans, there's no formal way to connect these with corporate giving.

6.2. How Companies Approach CSR

CSR in The Gambia tends to be reactive and donation-based, with companies often responding to immediate community needs rather than planning long-term projects. A few patterns stand out:

Most initiatives happen in and around Banjul, leaving rural areas underserved. Companies typically support education and healthcare, while other crucial areas like farming, renewable energy, and small business development get less attention. Many companies announce their CSR activities through media or their websites, but without consistent reporting, it's hard to measure their real impact.

Some companies are making notable contributions. Africell Gambia, for instance, gave about GMD 12 million to COVID-19 relief efforts. Trust Bank Gambia regularly supports schools and healthcare facilities with scholarships and equipment.

6.3. The Challenge of Fragmentation

This scattered approach to CSR creates several problems:

- Resources often end up concentrated in certain areas while others get overlooked
- CSR projects don't always align with national development goals
- Without proper reporting standards, it's hard to learn from successes or measure impact

6.4. Building a Better System

To make CSR more effective, The Gambia needs a framework that brings together public and private efforts. This could include:

- A central system to track CSR activities
- Standard ways to report results
- Better coordination between companies, government, and community groups
- Alignment of CSR with national priorities

This would help make corporate giving more effective and meaningful for The Gambia's development.

7. A New Approach to CSR Coordination

Based on research and best practices, here's a practical framework for making CSR work better in The Gambia:

7.1. A Central Council

Create a CSR & Shared Value Council to coordinate efforts:

- Led jointly by government development planners and business leaders
- Including relevant ministries, regulators, local authorities, and community groups
- Focusing on matching CSR activities with national development needs

7.2. Tracking Progress

Develop a digital system to monitor CSR:

- Record project details, location, value, and outcomes
- Make information publicly available
- Publish yearly reports on how CSR contributes to national development

7.3. Setting Priorities

The council would highlight key areas needing support each year, like:

- Medical equipment for maternal care
- Solar power for rural clinics
- Clean water in schools
- Storage facilities for farmers
- Training for small businesses

7.4. Ensuring Quality

To maintain standards:

- Use simple reporting templates
- Have independent verification for larger projects
- Match results with national development goals

7.5. Encouraging Participation

To keep companies engaged:

- Recognize outstanding CSR efforts
- Consider tax benefits where possible
- Ensure ethical standards through community involvement

8. Why Coordination Makes a Real Difference: How It Works

When CSR efforts are well-coordinated, everyone wins - from local communities to businesses themselves. Here's how coordination creates meaningful impact:

- **Spots Gaps and Reduces Overlap:** A national database shows exactly where help is needed most, so companies can direct their CSR efforts to overlooked areas and critical needs.
- **Makes Resources Go Further:** When companies team up on projects (like jointly funding solar-powered health clinics), they can achieve more with less and share the risks.
- **Builds Trust Through Openness:** When companies are upfront about their CSR activities and have their reports independently verified, both citizens and investors feel more confident about the impact [GRI, 2021].
- **Spreads Success Stories:** Using common measurements helps organizations learn from each other and scale up what works best [Kania & Kramer, 2011].
- **Connects to National Goals:** By linking CSR to the national development framework, we can track real progress and plan more effectively [MoFEA, 2024].
- **Brings More Partners to the Table:** When priorities are clear and data is transparent, it encourages other organizations and investors to join in, expanding what CSR can achieve.

9. Learning from Others

While The Gambia's situation is unique, we can learn valuable lessons from other African countries:

- South Africa shows us how a well-developed CSR system can work, with strong reporting standards and ways to verify impact. The Gambia could adopt simpler versions of these practices that work for smaller businesses.
- Nigeria demonstrates how government guidance can encourage more structured CSR efforts. Their approach to linking business contributions with national priorities could help shape The Gambia's coordination council.
- Kenya's experience with multi-stakeholder partnerships, especially in tracking SDGs and using public dashboards to guide investments, offers practical ideas we could adapt.

These examples highlight three key elements for The Gambia's coordination approach:

- A central organization to bring everyone together and keep efforts aligned
- Common ways to measure and report impact
- Public sharing of information to ensure accountability and attract more partners

By tailoring these lessons to fit The Gambia's size and resources, we can create a practical system that delivers real results.

10. Policy, Practical, and Academic Implications

10.1. Policy Implications

I recommend establishing a clear legal framework for CSR reporting and accountability. This should include a mandatory registry and annual CSR reporting for large companies and state-owned enterprises. To make this effective, we need to connect these requirements directly to our National Development Plan goals, so we can track real progress. Smart incentives like tax benefits and public recognition can encourage companies to participate, though we'll need careful oversight to prevent any misuse.

10.2. Practical Implications

Companies should use standardized reporting formats that clearly show how their CSR work supports national priorities. I've found that when companies team up on bigger, long-term projects, they can achieve much more than working alone. For major initiatives, independent verification helps build trust and allows for meaningful comparison. Digital tools for tracking and reporting make it easier to monitor progress and learn from results.

10.3. Academic Implications

We need to work closely with companies to develop meaningful metrics that capture both monies spent and actual social impact. Testing these coordinated CSR efforts through pilot programs will help us understand what works best. Long-term studies will be crucial to see how this structured approach affects development outcomes and cost-effectiveness. This research can contribute valuable insights about how various theoretical frameworks apply in smaller developing economies like The Gambia.

11. Implementation Framework / Action Plan

Using Lean Six Sigma principles, I propose this practical approach:

11.1. Define

Start by clearly outlining CSR goals that match our National Development Plan priorities - focusing on essential needs like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. We need to identify where help is most needed and set specific, measurable targets.

11.2. Measure

Map out current CSR activities across the country, looking at what's being done, where, and by whom. This will help us spot areas of overlap and identify communities that aren't getting enough support.

11.3. Analyse

Look closely at what's causing inefficiencies - whether it's poor coordination, scattered reporting, or other issues. Understanding these problems is crucial for finding solutions.

11.4. Improve

Create user-friendly reporting templates and establish a central coordinating body. Launch annual "CSR Priority Calls" to direct resources where they're most needed. Use technology to make reporting and tracking easier.

11.5. Control

Set up ongoing monitoring systems with clear metrics tied to development goals. Regular audits and independent verification will help maintain quality. Most importantly, learn from experience and adjust the approach as needed to ensure long-term success.

12. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Metrics

Let's talk about tracking the impact of CSR programs - it's crucial to make sure these initiatives actually make a difference and use resources wisely. Here's how we can measure success:

12.1. Key Performance Indicators [KPIs]

- Total money invested in CSR projects (tracked in Dalasi) across different sectors and regions
- How many projects line up with our national development goals
- Whether we're reaching overlooked areas compared to well-served regions
- Real impact on people: number of patients treated, students educated, businesses supported
- How well companies stick to reporting deadlines and requirements

12.2. Dashboard and Digital Registry

- An easy-to-use online platform where anyone can see where CSR money is going and what it's achieving
- Yearly report showcasing how businesses are contributing to Gambia's development
- Working hand-in-hand with national development tracking to show clear results

12.3. Quality Control

- Simple but effective checking system for all CSR projects
- Outside experts to verify bigger projects
- Making results public to build trust and keep everyone informed

12.4. Learning and Growth

- Regular check-ins with everyone involved to see what's working and what needs fixing
- Creating opportunities for companies to learn from each other's successes

13. Working Together and Managing Risks

Success depends on everyone playing their part effectively. Here's how we'll make that happen:

13.1. Who Does What

- Government departments guide priorities and help fund projects
- Businesses lead CSR projects and share updates
- Consumer protection agency keeps things fair
- Community groups ensure projects meet local needs
- Researchers help measure impact and suggest improvements

13.2. How We'll Stay Connected

- Regular meetings led by development planners and business leaders
- Yearly gatherings to align goals and share progress
- Modern communication tools for quick updates and easy reporting

13.3. Handling Potential Problems

- Avoiding duplicate efforts through central planning
- Making sure projects support national goals
- Getting complete, accurate reports
- Preventing favouritism through transparency
- Encouraging more businesses to join in through incentives

13.4. Building for the Long Term

- Regularly asking for feedback to improve
- Creating lasting partnerships
- Learning from other African countries while keeping solutions Gambian

14. Limitations and Future Research

As a researcher exploring CSR in The Gambia, I acknowledge several key limitations in my study. My analysis relies primarily on theoretical frameworks and existing literature, drawing from public sources and case studies from similar African contexts. Without direct empirical data from Gambian businesses, government bodies, or community beneficiaries, I cannot fully capture the on-the-ground reality of CSR initiatives or their monetary impact.

Key Limitations

- The lack of firsthand data makes it difficult to measure real-world CSR impact and effectiveness across different regions and sectors
- By relying on published sources, I may have missed many informal CSR activities, especially from smaller businesses and diaspora-owned companies
- While I suggest Lean Six Sigma approaches, these haven't yet been tested in Gambian CSR programs

Looking ahead, I recommend several promising research directions:

- Survey Gambian businesses to create a comprehensive map of current CSR activities and their alignment with development goals
- Interview key players including government officials, regulators, civil society groups, and community leaders
- Gather performance data to evaluate how well CSR programs deliver results
- Test the proposed registry and coordination system on a small scale before broader implementation
- Conduct detailed studies of specific sectors like healthcare or education to develop targeted recommendations

15. Conclusion

My research shows that CSR in The Gambia has tremendous potential to support government development efforts, particularly in delivering essential services. However, the current scattered approach, inconsistent reporting, and lack of coordination limit what these programs can achieve.

I've demonstrated that implementing a structured public-private framework - built around a national CSR registry, coordinating council, standardized reporting, and basic oversight - could:

- Eliminate redundant efforts and fill service gaps
- Make better use of resources through collaborative projects
- Build transparency and public confidence
- Better align private sector contributions with national development targets
- Help successful programs grow and sustain themselves

All in all, I believe adopting this framework, combined with process improvements inspired by Lean Six Sigma, would transform CSR in The Gambia into a more strategic and measurable force for development - one that creates lasting value for communities, government, and businesses alike.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

This research is free from any bias and nor was it influenced by any sponsorship or other means; and the author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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