

Business for Environment: Using Corporate Social Responsibility and Public-Private Partnerships to Achieve Environmental Goals in Thailand

Walker Young and Sangchan Limjirakan

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). To date, the 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 Thailand's private sector towards corporate social responsibility (CSR), the CBD, and public-private partnerships. A total of 36 companies participated, with a response rate around 6.58%. Respondents displayed a high level of engagement (65.6%) in environmental outreach projects across a variety of thematic areas. Several of the leading strategies in Thailand's National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), which are key drivers for national implementation of the CBD, are found to have direct relevance to the types of projects which Thai businesses are interested to engage in and provide expertise. To better engage the Thai private sector in environmental 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 are most likely to be provided.

Index Terms—Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), corporate social responsibility (CSR), public-private partnership.

I. 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].

Thailand made a signature to 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).

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. Such factors have implications for the private sector given the economic importance of natural resources to global trade. Research conducted by ten Kate and Laird (1999) shows that global sales of products which utilized some form of plant genetic resources totalled in between USD 500 and USD 800 billion a year as of 1999 [2]. Gurib-Fakim (2005) found that “in the pharmaceutical industry, natural products contribute somewhere between 25-50% of the total sales of the products on the market” [3].

Because of the economic importance of biodiversity and its utilization by the private sector, businesses have a stake in whether the objectives of the CBD are achieved. The Parties to the Convention are well aware of such linkages; hence, 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 frequency of references to business and private sector has 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 [4]. 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 in Thailand. Limjirakan, et al. (2009) conducted a survey with the public sector and academic employees in Thailand who are engaged

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Walker Young is with the Environment, Development and Sustainability Program, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Sangchan Limjirakan is a Director at the Environment, Development and Sustainability Program, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

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 [5]. However, insufficient private sector representatives participated in the 2009 study conducted by Limjirakan, et al., 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 "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" [6]. "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.

While CSR is one trend where businesses could engage environmental issues and thereby assist in the implementation of the CBD, another viable mechanism is that of public-private partnerships. Public-private partnerships involve the willing participation of a public agency or state entity with one or more private entities such as corporations, wherein the partners work together towards achieving a joint aim or project. Whereas CSR initiatives are typically led directly by the business entity and are not primarily driven by financial benefit, public-private partnerships usually involve joint planning and result in a profit for the business [7]. In effect, such partnerships are often driven by profit motives, with the government entity selecting a corporate partner whose services best align with the needs of the proposed project. Rausser, et al. (2000) surmise that public-private partnerships are a logical way for private companies to transfer knowledge to state actors via such collaboration [8]. Since national agencies are assigned as focal points for CBD implementation, such knowledge sharing stands to benefit national CBD outcomes as well.

Whether businesses in Thailand would willingly choose to engage in environmental projects and thematic issues through either CSR or public-private partnerships is not well understood. 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? Are Thai businesses willing to partner with government agencies on

environmental projects, and if so, what are their preferences? 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.

II. 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.

A. 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 [9].

B. 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.

III. 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, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and partnerships appear respectively in sub-sections B, C and D.

A. 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 [10].

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 I. The variety of responses reflects the diversity emblematic of the Thai private sector.

TABLE I: 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
Agriculture / 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.

B. 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 II 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 II: 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

C. 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 III lists the two highest priorities of participating companies’ CSR programs.

TABLE III: MAIN PRIORITIES OF CSR PROGRAMS WITHIN PARTICIPATING BUSINESSES

Answer Options	Response Percent	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

D. Public-Private Partnerships

A series of questions focused on partnerships were posed to the survey participants. First, the participants were asked to imagine that their company was involved in a partnership focused on environmental management. Based on such a partnership, the participants were asked to identify the most likely forms of support which their company would provide to the initiative, considering the company’s capabilities and strengths.

In general, respondents indicated that training of staff and personnel would be the most likely form of support provided, followed by management and advisory services and research collaboration (Table IV). Financial assistance and benefit sharing or patent extensions were deemed the least likely provisions in a partnership. Note that “financial support” as used in Table II is different from the type of “financial assistance” as used in Table IV; the former refers to monetary donations through voluntary CSR mechanisms controlled by

the private company whereas the latter refers specifically to the provision of financing to government partnerships.

TABLE IV: TYPES OF SUPPORT WHICH PARTICIPATING BUSINESSES WOULD PROVIDE IN A PARTNERSHIP

Answer Options	Very Likely or Certain	Possible	Not Likely	Response Count
Financial Assistance / Funding	3	14	7	24
Technology Transfer / Material Support	4	13	7	24
Management Consulting / Advisory Services	5	14	6	25
Training of Staff / Personnel	7	11	7	25
Benefit Sharing / Extension of Patent Rights or Knowledge	3	12	9	24
Research Collaboration	5	12	8	25

Participants were then asked to identify the top reasons why their company might opt out of a partnership with a government partner (Table V). Such reasons are important for government agencies to understand because the responses are potential risks which could undermine a public-private partnership from the start. For instance, nearly half of respondents indicated that the threat of high costs to the business were a major concern which could deter their company from participating. Over one-third of respondents felt that government partnerships would be avoided if the project did not directly relate to their company’s business model.

TABLE V: REASONS WHY PARTICIPATING BUSINESSES WOULD OPT OUT OF A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
This kind of project is not related to our business	35.7%	10
The cost to the company would be too high	46.4%	13
The government is corrupt and not a trustworthy partner	25.0%	7
Our company has nothing to offer this kind of partnership	14.3%	4
There is no benefit to the company in doing this kind of partnership	10.7%	3
Our company does not have the capacity to partner with the government	10.7%	3
Other	14.3%	4

Participants were also asked to identify which types of environmental projects their businesses would be interested in if partnering with the government in a public-private partnership. The responses were myriad, but the top three responses included:

- Communication, education and public awareness (68% interested)
- Conservation and sustainable use of natural resources (60% interested)
- Climate change and biodiversity (56% interested)

Such responses might potentially assist government focal points which lead the implementation of CBD relevant

policies to target their partnership campaigns on the thematic areas which are most likely to garner private sector support such as communication and education. This is important because not all themes scored well with the participating businesses. For instance, only 24% of respondents were interested to partner on ecotourism projects and less than 21% were interested in biotechnology or genetic research initiatives. Tailoring the type of partnership to thematic areas popular with Thai businesses may improve the potential for future public-private partnerships in Thailand.

IV. RELEVANCE OF SURVEY RESULTS FOR THAI ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

The survey results identified in section III have implications for the success or failure of Thailand’s environmental policies as well as the national implementation of the policies outlined in the CBD and its associated decisions.

One example comes in the form of Thailand’s National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) which are “the principal instruments for implementing the Convention at the national level” [11]. As stipulated in Article 6 of the Convention, all countries which have signed as a Member Party are required to submit NBSAPs to the CBD Secretariat.

Thailand’s second NBSAPs covered the period from 2003 – 2007, and consisted of seven strategies [12]:

1. Enhance knowledge, understanding and public awareness in the importance and value of biodiversity.
2. Building capacity and expertise of institutions and their staff on the conservation of biodiversity.
3. Strengthen capacity in conservation, restoration and protection of natural habitat, within and outside the protected areas.
4. Ensure the efficiency in conservation and sustainable use of species and genetic diversity.
5. Control, regulate and reduce the threats of biodiversity.
6. Provide incentives and encourage public participation for the conservation of biodiversity in accordance with Thai traditional cultural practices.
7. Promote and develop international cooperation and collaboration in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

As mentioned in section III, 68% of survey respondents indicated that their businesses would be interested to partner with the government on environmental projects related to communication, education and public awareness. Channeling that interest into actual project-based work would help to achieve the first strategy of Thailand’s second NBSAPs. In addition, 60% of participating businesses expressed interest in public-private partnerships which addressed conservation and sustainable use of natural resources – a direct correlation to strategies 2, 3, 4 and 7 of the NBSAPs.

The third NBSAPs cover the years 2008 – 2012 and offer even more opportunities for public-private partnerships to drive the successful implementation of the CBD at the national level. Worth highlighting is strategy 4 of the third NBSAPs, which seeks to “promote research, training,

education, public awareness and network on biodiversity” [13]. As shown in Table IV, the most popular provision of support for partnerships was training, followed by research collaboration and advisory services. By linking in the participating businesses to environmental partnerships, Thailand’s national environmental agencies could make substantial progress in the achievement of strategy 4 of the third NBSAPs.

V. CONCLUSION

With the understanding of environmental outreach, CSR and public-private partnerships based on the research findings above, many answers are reached with respect to the questions posed at the introduction.

- 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.

- Are Thai businesses willing to partner with government agencies on environmental projects, and if so, what are their preferences?

Yes; Thai businesses are generally willing to partner with government agencies on environmental projects, but the cost and the relevance of a given project to the core business is a commonly identified concern. Most respondents felt their business would be able to provide training to project staff and advisory services to public-private partnerships but very few (12.5%) thought it likely their business would provide financial support to a government partnership. Thai businesses also hold strong preferences towards the types of environmental projects that they would like to partner on. While 68% of businesses would participate in projects related to communication, education and public awareness, only 21% would be interested if the partnership was focused on biotechnology.

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, ecotourism), government agencies may improve the likelihood of finding an implementing partner from the business community. If social issues such as sustainable development, education and training are incorporated into environmental programs, this may also

make such programs more attractive to the private sector to engage in via mechanisms like CSR and public-private partnerships.

The potential for successfully engaging the private sector in public-private partnerships also requires the public sector to generate trust and transparency with potential partners. By preparing a clear and concise budget forecast of planned income and expenditures in advance of engaging potential businesses, government agencies could allay the fears of uncontrolled spending and cost concerns which many of the participating businesses worried over. In addition, the government agencies which are focused on CBD implementation could improve their chances of successfully partnering with a private business if they first devise a strategic plan which clearly identifies the roles and responsibilities of each partner. Targeting potential businesses based on the relevance of the environmental project to the company’s core business model could generate enhanced partnership opportunities.

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Walker Young received his M.A. degree in 2011 from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand in the field of Environment, Development and Sustainability. He earned his B.Sc. in management systems engineering and economics, as well as his B.A. in pre-engineering, from Columbia University in New York.

He has worked with the Worldwide Fund for

Nature (WWF) as Regional Coordinator of Monitoring and Evaluation for the Greater Mekong region. He also worked with Qualcomm, the multinational technology firm, as Senior Business Development Analyst and earlier as Project Analyst. Most recently he is Principal and Lead Consultant for Walker Young Consulting, based in California. Past publications include "Rio Conventions Redux: An Argument for Merging the Trio into a Single Convention on Environmental Management" (New York: Consilience, 2010) and "Private Sector Engagement in Environmental Outreach Projects in Thailand" (Singapore: IACSIT Press, 2011). His current research interests include the role of monitoring and compliance within global environmental governance and operational systems approaches for improved coherence across multilateral environmental agreements.

Mr. Young is a member of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) and the International Society of Sustainability Professionals (ISSP).



Dr. Sangchan Limjirakan is Director of Environment, Development and Sustainability Program, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University. Currently, she serves as Thailand's Deputy Head Negotiator on Climate Change. Dr. Limjirakan is an expert member of the National Policy Committee on Climate Change, the National Environmental Board and the National Committee on Biological Diversity.