

Corporate social responsibility in EU spotlight

By Michael Soltys / Senior Editor

Two ends of the world exchanged notes yesterday on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in a seminar organized by the Swedish and Finnish Embassies and the Eurocámara Argentina with input from the Labour Ministry headed by the minister Carlos Tomada himself.

This somewhat dry subject (which lacks both political leadership and media presence, as admitted by seminar participants) was given an alcoholic flavour by CSR personnel from the Swedish and Finnish state liquor retail monopolies Systembolaget and Alko respectively, as well as the invitation extended to INV National Wine Institute president Guillermo García (who could not make it).

As explained by the Labour Ministry, much remains to be done because while big companies tend to meet international standards and do not feel pressured to do more, the PyME small and medium-sized companies are often scrambling to pay wages with nothing to spare for CSR while the quality of jobs has become precarious. And also to pay taxes, was one pointed question? No, was the answer, tax breaks have often been offered to PyMEs to improve various aspects of social responsibility with uneven results. But there were also more positive stories such as harvest kindergartens.

An all-woman panel began with CRS Sweden's Parul Sharma, who listed the four main pillars of CRS as human rights, labour standards, the environment and anti-corruption (removing graft would improve the efficiency of public service investments by 20-70 percent, she said) — these areas all needed upgrading from a voluntary basis to public-private partnership. Sharma devoted much of her talk to safe water, the lack of which has contributed to rising food commodity prices — Coca Cola has halted production in much of India for that reason.

Following the Labour Ministry, Alko and Systembolaget were then introduced to the Argentine public by Hille Korhonen and Marie Nygren respectively. Alko (which monopolizes all alcoholic drinks except beer) has 350 stores in Finland, a payroll of 2,500 and a clientele of 60 million worldwide — among the 61 countries in its supply chain, Argentina ranks 5th for red wine and 10th for white. Systembolaget has 431 shops in Sweden with a payroll of 5,000, an annual turnover of 270 million euros and 125 million visits a year — Argentina has a market share of 3.7 percent as its 8th supplier. But Systembolaget increasingly sells non-alcoholic drinks in its concern for the 300,000 Swedish children of parents with drinking problems, Nygren said. Worldwide, it also tries to reduce the use of pesticides by their suppliers, as well as their carbon footprints.

The seminar at the Catholic University (UCA) was closed by Eurocámara president Viktor Klima (Austrian chancellor 1996-9, who has run Volkswagen Argentina since 2000). Describing the event as only the beginning of co-operation, he contrasted the Latin American concept of CSR as “charity” with European insistence on knowing how the money was made. Argentina's biggest asset was its human capital and that could only be good for CSR, he concluded.

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