

Scratching the surface of Corporate Social Responsibility

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The Access to Medicines Foundation's new index turns out to be less groundbreaking and more of a mild tremor. The index set out to be a transparent, quantifiable comparison of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for twenty pharmaceutical companies. What we have is an attractive new business tool for big pharma. The index has taken a 'strictly business' approach to measuring access to essential medicines, presenting data collected from the giant pharmaceutical companies while overlooking crucial information from end-users and local consumers—patients in developing countries.

The core approach of the index, published by a foundation led by a former industry marketing consultant, assesses the pharmaceutical companies on a five point scale according to criteria developed by a Dutch investment research consultancy. The weakness of the study lies in its 'on paper' approach to measuring the effectiveness of the CSR programmes. Moreover, the methodology leaves the results vulnerable to attack. The index is based on information made available by stakeholders, pharmaceutical companies and a few NGOs, with the largest input coming from surveys of the pharmaceutical industry itself.

Five multinational pharmaceutical companies take the top spots in the index while generic manufacturers languish nearer the bottom of the list, despite doing more to improve access to essential medicines for the world's poor through lowering drug prices. This index may give a financial boost to the big brands and their 'socially-conscious' investors but it cannot achieve its objective of real improvements in access to essential medicine in developing countries.

The aspiration to produce a quantifiable study of CSR standards is laudable. However, measuring access to essential medicines is best achieved by looking at both pharmaceutical policy and the view from the ground. Without accompanying data on the effectiveness of pharmaceutical CSR policy, the value of the index is, at best, debatable. Having the rules is not the same as playing by the rules. What we need is a comprehensive analysis of industry performance on access to essential medicines that rewards impact rather than rhetoric and promotes health outcomes rather than investment incentives.

PRESS RELEASE

Overtoom 60/II
1054 HK Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 20 683 3684
Fax: +31 20 685 5002
Email: info@haiweb.org
www.haiweb.org