The Dyke

Empowering communities through corporate social responsibility: The role of Zimbabwe Power Company's Public Relations Department in Kariba

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Abstract

This study investigates how the Zimbabwe Power Company (ZPC) in Kariba employs corporate social responsibility (CSR) through its public relations (PR) department to engage with the Kariba community from 2020 to 2023. It assesses the effectiveness of ZPC's CSR programmes in addressing local community needs and strengthening stakeholder relationships. This qualitative research, based on a constructivist philosophy and interpretivist research theory, employed interviews and focus group discussions to gather insights from community members and PR personnel. Grounded in stakeholder theory, the study reveals that ZPC's CSR and PR initiatives foster dialogical communication that effectively addresses community concerns. The findings indicate that ZPC's CSR efforts are generally responsive to local needs. The study recommends that ZPC adopts a more community-driven approach, allowing the community greater input in programme development to avoid the perception of imposed initiatives.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Public Relations, Community Engagement, Stakeholder Theory, Kariba Community

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Introduction

This study examines how corporate social responsibility (CSR) serves as a strategic tool for the Zimbabwe Power Company (ZPC) to engage with communities in Kariba for the period 2020 to 2023. Recognised as one of the leading implementers of CSR initiatives in Zimbabwe, ZPC's efforts in Kariba are particularly noteworthy for addressing community needs and enhancing sustainable development. The primary areas of CSR focus are on the suburbs of Mahombekombe, Nyamhunga, and Heights, where ZPC has implemented diverse community-oriented programmes.

While substantial research has been conducted globally and regionally on CSR, very few studies have specifically examined the role of public relations departments in shaping and delivering CSR initiatives that respond directly to the needs of host communities (Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2021; Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2020; Makanyeza et al., 2019; Benecke & Verwey, 2020). CSR requires corporations in post-bureaucratic contexts to develop a new social contract, redefining responsibility boundaries and ensuring accountability in resource use and environmental contributions (Maurer, 2021). In Zimbabwe, however, the extent to which companies like ZPC Kariba have evolved in their responsibility and accountability practices remains unclear. This study, therefore, aims to address these gaps, specifically looking at CSR through the lens of strategic communication and stakeholder theory within the context of ZPC Kariba.

CSR is defined by two primary components, philanthropy and sponsorship, both of which help organisations address host community challenges (Vengel, 2020; Benn & Bolton, 2021). Philanthropy encompasses donations to social causes, such as education and health, while sponsorship focuses on cultural and social projects aligned with corporate values (Navickas & Kontautiene, 2022). This study assesses how ZPC Kariba has employed both approaches to support its host communities and foster community engagement, particularly amidst Zimbabwe's challenging economic environment.

Studies in South Africa have shown that CSR can enhance corporate reputation and strengthen community relationships (Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2022; Jordaan, 2023). Yet, CSR in Zimbabwe remains less institutionalised and standardised, with companies often failing to address broader social issues like human rights and sustainable development (Nyahunzvi, 2021). This study examines ZPC's CSR impact in Kariba, with a focus on fostering inclusivity and diversity to

strengthen future corporate-community relations while offering insights into the mutual benefits CSR can foster between corporations and communities. Examining how ZPC Kariba's initiatives contribute to an inclusive stakeholder relationship is hoped to benefit both the firm and its host communities.

Background

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has gained traction among several companies in Zimbabwe, with active engagement from firms such as OK Zimbabwe, Econet Wireless, Delta Beverages, and various hospitality industry chains (Makanyeza, Chitambira, & Kakava, 2018; Kakava, Mbizo, & Manyeruke, 2013; Maphosa, 1997). Makanyeza et al. (2018) align with Inoue and Lee (2011) in arguing that CSR initiatives, while beneficial for communities, must also contribute to a company's bottom line to be sustainable in the long term. Their study revealed that effective employee relations positively impact firm performance, indicating a link between internal CSR and financial outcomes. In contrast, Nyahunzvi (2013) highlighted a gap in CSR reporting within Zimbabwe's tourism and hospitality sector, noting that many firms fail to account for broader social and environmental responsibilities.

Historically, research on CSR in Zimbabwe has been limited, with Maphosa (1997) conducting one of the earliest studies involving 45 companies listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange. Maphosa posited that CSR initiatives in Zimbabwe often aimed to address societal challenges proactively, especially among non-profit-oriented corporations. However, none of these studies explicitly focused on the role of CSR in fostering sustainable stakeholder relationships, particularly in the context of public utilities like the Zimbabwe Power Company (ZPC) in Kariba.

While the studies by Chitambira and Kakava (2018), Matsa and Masimbiti (2014), Mabhena and Moyo (2014), and Nyahunzvi (2013) provided relevant insights, they did not examine CSR as a public relations strategy for engaging and meeting the needs of host communities. The existing literature tends to address dialogic strategies that enhance stakeholder engagement, but there remains a gap in exploring CSR as a strategic communication tool for sustained stakeholder relationships (Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2021; Benecke & Verwey, 2020).

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining CSR through the lens of strategic communication and stakeholder theory within the context of ZPC Kariba's engagement with its surrounding communities from 2020 to 2023.

By assessing how CSR functions as a communication strategy, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how companies in Zimbabwe can use CSR to cultivate enduring and mutually beneficial relationships with their stakeholders, thus offering a fresh perspective on CSR's role beyond traditional philanthropic efforts. This approach is particularly pertinent in Zimbabwe, where companies face unique social and economic challenges that demand innovative approaches to community engagement and social responsibility.

Strategic Communication

Falkheimer and Heide (2022) find strategic communication as a multidisciplinary academic field that reflects and influences organisational and societal dynamics. Zerfass et al. (2020) further argue that strategic communication operates in environments marked by complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and significant risk, making it a vital tool for navigating challenging contexts. This study handles strategic communication as a social phenomenon, particularly focusing on its relevance and application in modern society and its interplay with other communication disciplines. In the Global South, particularly outside South Africa, research on the role of strategic communication in fostering relationships between corporations and communities is limited (De Klerk & Verwey, 2013).

Strategic communication, as outlined by De Klerk and Verwey (2013), involves meticulous planning, tactical development, and accurate message encoding to ensure clarity and engagement with target audiences. This approach is increasingly aided by advanced communication technologies. Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) note that both strategic and contemporary communication studies are relatively new fields within the social sciences, presenting opportunities to explore their influence on corporate-stakeholder relationships. This study aimed to determine if ZPC in Kariba perceived strategic communication as an integral management tool in line with practices in the Global North.

Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) proposed that strategic communication functions as a foundational framework for various communication practices across diverse contexts. However, it remains uncertain whether corporations in Zimbabwe, such as ZPC, leverage strategic communication as a unifying approach to stakeholder engagement. This study deconstructs the term 'strategic communication' to explore whether it inherently implies manipulative or objective-driven practices, or if it can be interpreted through alternative, critical perspectives that encompass diverse scholarly views. Nothhaft et al. (2018) suggest that organisations exist fundamentally by the grace of society,

highlighting the importance of aligning corporate communication with societal expectations and values. Slabbert (2016) traces the origins of strategic communication to government and military domains, where it emphasised objective-driven practices. Over time, however, its scope has expanded to include areas such as public relations, health communication, and financial communication. Scholars from the Global South emphasise a shift in strategic communication towards a bottom-up approach, stressing organisational 'listening' and embedding practices, particularly among leadership (Molefe & Overton de Klerk, 2019; Slabbert, 2016; Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015; Overton de Klerk & Verwey, 2013; Wiggill, 2011).

Strategic communication is central to this study as it reveals how organisations can communicate for societal benefit by engaging communities in ways that address their needs and priorities. For ZPC, this involves using strategic communication to inform and engage Kariba communities on CSR initiatives that enhance livelihoods. By exploring perspectives from both the Global North and Global South, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how strategic communication practices can support effective CSR implementation in ZPC's engagement with Kariba communities from 2020 to 2023.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman 1984) posits that a stakeholder in an organisation encompasses any group or individual who can influence or is influenced by the achievement of that organisation's objectives. Molefe and Overton-de Klerk (2019) affirm that stakeholder theory suggests organisations must foster relationships with all stakeholders to understand their expectations and meet them effectively, thereby benefiting both the organisation and the wider community. This study examines how the Zimbabwe Power Company (ZPC) in Kariba engages with and is impacted by its host communities through CSR programmes, focusing specifically on three selected communities. It also assesses whether ZPC's interactions with these communities reflect a mutual, interdependent relationship.

The Stakeholder Theory is integral to discussions on the societal role of businesses, emphasising the interdependence between organisations and external factors, from which concepts like CSR and corporate philanthropy arise (Boucher & Rendtorff, 2016). The stakeholder-inclusive approach has gained prominence worldwide, particularly in South Africa, where the King III Report on Corporate Governance stressed the importance of engaging a broad range of

stakeholders (Rensburg & De Beer, 2011). Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013) highlight that there has been a shift from traditional corporate philanthropy to co-empowerment and accountability within CSR, especially in South Africa, as organisations recognise the economic imperative of engaging inclusively with stakeholders. Scholars argue that in the postmodern era, with rapid technological advancements, innovation, and flatter organisational structures, effective stakeholder collaboration is increasingly vital (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013; Botha, 2021). Active stakeholder engagement in CSR initiatives is essential for fostering robust participation, allowing stakeholders to share their perspectives and expectations, which strengthens CSR's impact (Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2019).

Phillips (2003) critiques the Stakeholder Theory, suggesting that it may offer unscrupulous managers an opportunity to prioritise personal interests over organisational accountability, potentially reigniting agency issues that shareholder wealth maximisation aims to prevent. The current study aligns with Freeman et al. (2010), who argue that stakeholder theory can weaken business accountability, as a business unaccountable to all is effectively accountable to none. This criticism underlines the importance of ensuring a balanced approach where stakeholder engagement promotes genuine accountability.

For ZPC in Kariba, therefore, it remains to be seen how effectively the organisation engages with its stakeholders, including its three primary host communities, to ensure accountability through community empowerment. By examining ZPC's CSR efforts in Zimbabwe, this study established knowledge on how the Stakeholder Theory is applied in practice within the power sector and whether it supports sustainable and accountable engagement with the communities embedded within its operational sphere.

Methodology

Guided by the following objectives:

- *To establish the strategies used by ZPC Kariba's Public Relations Department in engaging with three surrounding communities.*
- *To assess the responsiveness of ZPC Kariba to the needs of these three nearby communities from 2020 to 2023.*

This study adopts a qualitative approach, underpinned by constructivist philosophy and interpretivist theory, drawing on primary data collected from interviews and focus group discussions. This qualitative case study is grounded

in constructivist and interpretivist epistemology. Constructivism, as noted by Creswell (2009, 2014), challenges the idea of objective truths, proposing instead that individuals construct subjective meanings from their experiences. In this framework, meanings are varied, multiple, and socially constructed. Tracey (2013) supports this, suggesting that the interpretive perspective views reality as constructed rather than simply 'out there' waiting to be discovered. This philosophical foundation underscores the subjective experiences of ZPC employees and community members in Kariba, exploring sustainability and stakeholder relationships in a localised social context (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Pernecky, 2016).

The study's ontology is relative, recognising that perceptions of ZPC's CSR efforts among community members are diverse, reflecting multiple interpretations rather than a singular objective truth. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with selected ZPC employees and community representatives—spanning the Mahombekombe, Nyamhunga, and Heights suburbs—served to co-construct an understanding of the effectiveness of ZPC's CSR programmes in meeting community needs. This method allowed for "thick descriptions" (Bryman, 2016) of the lived experiences of participants and insights from ZPC employees involved in CSR.

Non-probability sampling techniques, specifically purposive and convenience sampling, were employed. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of key ZPC employees, including those directly involved in CSR, while convenience sampling allowed for the selection of community representatives based on accessibility and relevance (Willis, 2017; Bryman, 2016). The study included 27 community participants—councillors, businesspeople, and elders—with gender-balanced groups to ensure diverse perspectives. Consent was obtained, and participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and non-remunerated. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews facilitated in-depth exploration with ZPC personnel, while FGDs enabled participants from the host communities to express their views collectively. According to Robson (2013), FGDs are effective for gathering data that reflects participants' own words and ideas stimulated by group interactions.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to interpret the data. CDA, as defined by Weinger (2012), challenges language use, examining how discourse shapes social realities and power relations (Patton, 2014). Themes were developed based on study objectives and participant responses, ensuring that

findings reflected the perspectives of ZPC Kariba and its communities on CSR effectiveness and stakeholder engagement.

Strategies used by ZPC Kariba PR Department in engaging with the community

The study found that ZPC Kariba allocated 25% of its annual budget to CSR initiatives, implementing at least five key programmes, including building schools and clinics, constructing roads, creating local employment opportunities, sponsoring the ZPC football team, and offering internships to university students from the community. These initiatives predominantly focused on the Mahombekombe, Nyamhunga, and Heights suburbs. Additionally, ZPC invested 40% of its budget in Corporate Philanthropy (CP), supporting broader community welfare efforts. These findings align with responses from interviewed ZPC personnel, who highlighted the organisation's commitment to sustainable community development and local engagement (Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2019; Freeman et al., 2010). The following were noted:

> *Our organisation employs various strategies in engaging with host communities, who play a crucial role in granting us the social licence to operate within their locale. We use methods such as sponsored walks, donations, and corporate philanthropy to support projects like building schools and clinics, constructing roads, and sponsoring the ZPC football team* **(ZPC Respondent 1).**

> *We approach community engagement through a combination of top-down, bottom-up, and lateral communication strategies. Our organisation does not impose itself upon host communities; instead, we actively respond to their needs through CSR programmes, sponsorships, and philanthropy. All three host communities—**Mahombekombe**, **Nyamhunga**, and **Heights** suburbs—receive philanthropic contributions, donations, and sponsorships aimed at enhancing their quality of life* **(ZPC Respondent 2).**

> *ZPC Kariba has contributed to local schools, churches, orphanages, and hospitals and has supported employee health initiatives by raising awareness and opening health centres for HIV/AIDS patients, as well as providing medication for malaria, cancer, and tuberculosis. Health campaigns and donations for community events have been conducted to foster strong stakeholder relationships* **(ZPC Respondent 3).**

> *No single approach suits all three Kariba communities equally. We use a top-down approach to communicate ZPC developments of mutual interest and a bottom-up approach for community issues with potential impacts on their livelihoods. However, a sense of entitlement among some local communities remains a challenge. ZPC Kariba has supported **Mahombekombe, Nyamhunga,** and **Heights** suburbs by building schools and clinics, constructing roads, employing locals, sponsoring the ZPC football team, and providing internship opportunities for university students* **(ZPC Respondent 4).**

From the responses above, it is evident that the ZPC Kariba PR department uses CSR programmes to engage with its three host communities. The responses suggest that various strategies, including sponsorship and philanthropy, are employed, demonstrating a diverse approach that encompasses top-down, bottom-up, and lateral communication methods. However, the researchers observed that the top-down approach implicitly suggests that ZPC Kariba may sometimes impose its initiatives on the community without fully addressing their expressed needs, which could be seen as problematic. Community engagement efforts have resulted in the construction of infrastructure, such as schools, clinics, and roads. Yet, it remains unclear whether these developments truly align with community priorities or if residents were involved in deciding which projects would be most beneficial.

Additionally, the study found that ZPC supports eight Corporate Philanthropy programmes in Mahombekombe, Heights, and Nyamhunga. These include donations to ZANU-PF during election periods, as well as support for hospitals, schools, churches, orphanages, community festivals, and health initiatives. The findings also indicate that ZPC has implemented two Health Campaign (HC) programmes within these communities, focusing on Cancer and HIV/ AIDS awareness. The following direct quotes from respondents support these findings:

> *ZPC is one of the most responsive organisations we have, consistently addressing our community needs. Many residents in **Mahombekombe** enjoy the sports activities ZPC organises to promote health and well-being. Last year, we had an annual festival in Kariba, broadcasted nationwide by our local television network, which brought great pride to the community. We appreciate that ZPC's approach respects our needs and does not impose programmes upon us **(Respondent 1 from First Focus Group Discussion)**.*

> *Our community in Charara has benefited from numerous ZPC programmes. The organisation has made significant contributions, including donations to the ruling party, ZANU PF, widely supported in this area. Additionally, many primary and secondary schools have received donations for sports equipment, library books, clinic medicines, and food for orphans **(Respondent 2 from Second Focus Group Discussion)**.*

> *ZPC Kariba engages with all three communities equitably on issues such as medicine requests for local clinics and hospitals, school support, and assistance for orphans. Their sponsorship of our annual festival, which unites the communities in a ceremony to honour our ancestors and ensure the dam remains full, is deeply valued. ZPC has also supported surrounding communities by sponsoring cancer and HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns **(Respondent 3 from Third Focus Group Discussion)**.*

*ZPC Kariba swiftly responds to our challenges, building quality schools, providing sports opportunities for our grandchildren, and supporting HIV/AIDS awareness. Two months ago, I underwent surgery for prostate cancer, thanks to ZPC Kariba's health initiative encouraging elderly people from **Charara, Mahombekombe,** and **Heights** to get checked, receive medication, and access necessary treatments. Without their support, my health would have been at great risk **(Elder from Charara).***

The above quotations are open to multiple interpretations from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, allowing researchers to explore both explicit and implicit meanings (Weinger, 2022; Patton, 2020). From the first quotation, community members express satisfaction with ZPC Kariba's responsiveness to their needs. However, it remains unclear if the entire community requested the festival sponsorship, raising questions about collective versus selective engagement. The second FGD respondent acknowledged the numerous CSR initiatives, yet links them to the ruling ZANU PF party, which may indicate political alignment among community members. This could reflect a perception that CSR is intertwined with political influence, a notion explored by Falkheimer and Heide (2022) in their study of corporate and political dynamics in developing economies. Although the respondent mentions donations to schools, libraries, and clinics, the value of these contributions and their proportionality to ZPC's profits remain unspecified, highlighting a gap in transparency (Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2020).

The third respondent, an elder, appreciates the health support provided by ZPC Kariba, particularly in addressing issues like prostate cancer and HIV/AIDS among the elderly. However, it remains ambiguous whether this support is accessible to all elders or only a select few, raising concerns about the inclusivity of ZPC's health-related CSR initiatives. One notes that ZPC may face challenges in fulfilling some commitments due to prolonged economic instability in Zimbabwe, which has burdened many corporations (Freeman et al., 2021). This economic strain may explain limitations in the breadth and consistency of ZPC's CSR efforts. Nonetheless, ZPC's contributions are seen as significant in promoting community welfare, though broader engagement and transparency in allocation may enhance community relations and programme effectiveness.

Response of organisation to communities demands through public relations

Focus group discussions with participants from the Mahombekombe, Heights, and Nyamhunga suburbs, including community elders, revealed that the organisation does not fully address all community demands as anticipated. Some responses indicated that ZPC Kariba's CSR efforts do not consistently meet the specific needs expressed by the community. For example, when community members requested the construction of a marketplace for displaying their sculpture work, ZPC promised assistance, yet no structure has been provided to date. Community members expressed that many of ZPC's CSR initiatives do not align with their actual needs or address pressing concerns. This disconnect suggests a possible gap between ZPC's CSR planning and the actual priorities of the host communities. Participants voiced a desire for the organisation to respond to their requests in a manner that produces tangible, community-oriented outcomes. The findings suggest that for CSR to be effective, it must be driven by active engagement with the community to ensure alignment with their expectations and desired outcomes, an approach supported by recent literature on CSR and stakeholder engagement (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2020).

ZPC Kariba engages with all three communities, adopting a bottom-up approach to gain legitimacy and maintain a social licence to operate, as neglecting community needs could risk protests and business disruption (ZPC Respondent 1).

ZPC has addressed many of our community requests, yet some issues remain unresolved. Occasionally, ZPC introduces programmes that involve outsiders, which, while beneficial, sometimes leave our own young and energetic community members without employment opportunities, as they tend to hire from outside (Respondent 1, First Focus Group Discussion).

We are dissatisfied, feeling that ZPC sometimes imposes programmes that lack relevance to our daily lives. Although they have built sports facilities, including football grounds and tennis courts, these activities are not widely popular in our community. We would prefer initiatives that meet our actual needs, like creating spaces for selling vegetables, tomatoes, and sculptures (Respondent 2, Second Focus Group Discussion).

Much of the infrastructure they describe as 'world-class' does not directly benefit our community. ZPC often seems to make decisions without genuinely considering our needs. While we may gain some benefits, the projects do not feel community driven. The organisation should listen to us and avoid imposing programmes (Respondent 3, Third Focus Group Discussion).

*ZPC used to contribute positively to our communities, but I sense they are now less capable due to the economic downturn. They should focus on implementing a few meaningful projects that truly respond to local expectations, as they used to in the past (**Councillor**).*

These responses reflect a desire among community members for ZPC Kariba to adopt a more participatory approach, ensuring that CSR initiatives align more closely with the communities' specific needs. The above submissions reveal that ZPC Kariba has, in many cases, addressed the needs of its host communities using a bottom-up approach, involving communities in decision-making and implementing CSR programmes that align with local socio-economic needs. However, there is a need to critically assess whether ZPC genuinely implements these programmes with community welfare in mind or as a strategic move to secure acceptance and legitimacy to continue operations (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022).

Responses from focus group discussions (FGDs) suggest that while some community requests have been met, certain issues remain unresolved, creating dissatisfaction among residents who feel some initiatives lack genuine community focus. This raises questions about whether CSR programmes truly reflect community priorities or primarily serve ZPC's corporate interests. Effective CSR should foster dialogue, inclusivity, and respect for the unique culture and needs of host communities, which some participants feel is not fully achieved (Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2020). Furthermore, there is a sense of scepticism among community members regarding the motivations behind ZPC's programmes. The FGDs highlighted concerns that certain initiatives are more aligned with corporate objectives than authentic community needs, indicating that while ZPC has fostered a degree of inclusivity, some actions may still be perceived as tokenistic. As noted by Falkheimer and Heide (2022), CSR should be rooted in genuine community engagement, emphasising mutual respect and transparency.

It also emerged that ZPC's CSR efforts may be constrained by Zimbabwe's challenging economic environment, which impacts the ability of companies to meet community needs fully. Economic difficulties often affect organisations' capacity to deliver consistent and impactful CSR, suggesting that a nation's economic context indirectly shapes the nature and scope of CSR initiatives (Freeman et al., 2021). In this light, ZPC's efforts reflect both the possibilities and limitations inherent in CSR practices in economically strained environments like Zimbabwe.

Discussions

The findings of this study align with stakeholder theory, which posits that organisations are accountable to their stakeholders and must balance the interests of diverse groups to achieve long-term success and societal benefit (Phillips & Freeman, 2010). Stakeholder theory, as Freeman et al. (2010) suggest, stresses the importance of organisations cultivating relationships with all stakeholder groups to foster mutual benefits and drive sustainable development. This study's findings resonate with Molefe and Overton (2019), who assert that organisations must engage with stakeholders, particularly host communities, to appreciate their needs and expectations. This engagement not only aids in addressing community concerns but also fosters organisational prosperity. In this way, the study supports the view that effective stakeholder engagement, through corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthropic activities, plays a crucial role in meeting community expectations and building robust corporate-community relations (Boucher & Rendtorff, 2016; Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013).

The study highlights the critical role of CSR in balancing economic, social, and environmental responsibilities to meet stakeholder expectations. Several scholars advocate for CSR as a means of fostering inclusivity, accountability, and participation in decision-making processes, especially for programmes that impact host communities (Overton-de Klerk & Verwey, 2013; Rensburg & De Beer, 2011). This research supports these assertions, demonstrating that CSR initiatives not only fulfil organisational obligations but also contribute to sustainable community development by addressing real needs within host communities. By enabling stakeholder collaboration and innovation, CSR can enhance relationships between organisations and communities, providing mutual benefits that foster sustainable development for future generations (Botha, 2021; Steenkamp & Ransburg, 2019).

Moreover, this study aligns with the views of both Global North and Global South scholars who describe strategic communication as a dynamic, interdisciplinary field that plays a critical role in fostering mutual understanding between organisations and society (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Zerfass et al., 2020). The findings reflect the evolving nature of communication, which has transitioned from a one-way dissemination of information to an inclusive, participatory process. This shift, from monologue to dialogue and from a functional to a co-creational perspective, emphasises that effective communication now involves

active engagement and dialogue with stakeholders at all levels (Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2019; Slabbert, 2016; Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015).

The study demonstrates that ZPC Kariba's CSR initiatives have contributed to economic, social, and environmental sustainability within its host communities by facilitating infrastructure development, including schools, clinics, roads, clean water access through boreholes, and sports facilities such as football grounds (Jordaan, 2022; Van der Watt & Marais, 2021). These findings support previous research that positions CSR as a vehicle for improving organisational reputation and fostering goodwill with host communities, thus creating a positive cycle of mutual benefit (Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2012). By effectively engaging with its host communities, ZPC Kariba not only enhances its corporate reputation but also strengthens community trust, which is essential for maintaining a social licence to operate (Stroh, 2007).

The role of CSR in reputation building is further illustrated by the study's participants, who regard ZPC's contributions as beneficial, though not always adequately aligned with specific community needs. Reputation management, as suggested by Stroh (2007), involves configuring strategies that reflect community perceptions and contribute positively to corporate identity. The dimensions of CSR-driven reputation—such as philanthropy, sponsorship, environmental stewardship, and community development—are instrumental in reinforcing organisational legitimacy and stakeholder trust (Makanyeza, Chitambira, & Kakava, 2018; Steenkamp & Rensburg, 2012).

Despite these successes, the study also revealed gaps in ZPC Kariba's CSR approach. Focus group discussions indicate that while ZPC has implemented several CSR initiatives, community members sometimes feel excluded from decision-making processes, leading to a perception that certain programmes lack relevance to their immediate needs. For example, community requests for local markets to display and sell sculptures have gone unmet, raising concerns about whether ZPC's CSR activities genuinely prioritise community desires or primarily serve corporate objectives. These insights reflect a need for ZPC to adopt a more dialogical and inclusive CSR approach that respects community culture and actively involves local stakeholders in programme planning (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022).

Further complicating ZPC's CSR effectiveness is the economic environment in Zimbabwe, which has limited the resources available for CSR and hindered the organisation's ability to fulfil all community demands. Economic instability often

affects organisational capacity to deliver consistent CSR, a challenge noted by Freeman et al. (2021), who argue that CSR in economically constrained contexts requires adaptability and strategic prioritisation. For ZPC, this economic strain has meant that while CSR efforts are appreciated, they are sometimes perceived as insufficient or selective in meeting community needs. This underscores the broader challenges of implementing sustainable CSR in developing economies, where financial constraints may inhibit organisations from fully addressing stakeholder expectations (Freeman et al., 2021).

The findings also suggest that CSR should not be a static endeavour but a responsive, evolving strategy that aligns with both corporate goals and community needs. Effective CSR requires that organisations balance stakeholder expectations with financial realities, demonstrating commitment through transparent and meaningful community engagement. This aligns with Zerfass et al. (2020), who assert that strategic communication must adapt to societal changes and integrate diverse stakeholder perspectives to maintain organisational legitimacy.

In examining ZPC Kariba's CSR practices, the study reinforces the notion that CSR serves as a crucial bridge between organisational objectives and community welfare. For CSR to be impactful, it must transcend token gestures and genuinely address local needs, fostering a sense of co-ownership and mutual benefit. This perspective is supported by recent scholarship, which emphasises that CSR programmes should embody a two-way, participatory communication model that respects the voices and contributions of all stakeholders (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Molefe & Overton-de Klerk, 2019).

This study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on strategic communication, CSR, and stakeholder engagement. By using a qualitative approach, the research provided valuable insights not only for strategic communication scholars but also for policymakers, corporate leaders, and government officials. The findings highlight the importance of adapting CSR strategies to local contexts, particularly in regions facing economic challenges, and underscore the potential for CSR to function as a transformative tool that aligns corporate actions with community aspirations (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022; Jordaan, 2022).

The ZPC Kariba's CSR initiatives demonstrate both strengths and areas for improvement. While the organisation has made significant strides in community engagement and infrastructure development, there remains a

need for more inclusive, dialogue-based approaches that ensure community voices are central to CSR planning. Future research could expand on this study by exploring CSR implementation in other sectors or by employing mixed methods to capture a more comprehensive understanding of CSR's impact on community development. Additionally, further studies could investigate how economic factors influence CSR effectiveness in developing economies, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of CSR's role in achieving sustainable development in the Global South. By examining ZPC Kariba's CSR practices, the study noted the potential for CSR to function as both a strategic asset for organisations and a means of supporting sustainable community development. Through a commitment to inclusivity, accountability, and responsiveness, CSR can enhance corporate-community relations and foster resilience in host communities, even amidst economic challenges.

Conclusion

This study examined the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and public relations (PR) strategies of ZPC Kariba in engaging with three selected communities in Kariba. Through qualitative analysis, the study outlined the CSR programmes implemented by ZPC Kariba from 2020 to 2023, designed to address community needs and foster positive stakeholder relationships. Findings indicated that while ZPC has made notable efforts to respond to community requests, these efforts have not consistently addressed all community concerns, revealing gaps in both the responsiveness and effectiveness of certain initiatives.

Community members expressed an ongoing desire for ZPC to address their needs comprehensively, aiming for CSR outcomes that reflect community-driven priorities. The study found that ZPC, while attempting to engage with local stakeholders, faces significant limitations due to Zimbabwe's economic instability and resource constraints, which impact the organisation's ability to fulfil all community expectations. Despite these challenges, ZPC's PR department has successfully fostered engagement through a CSR approach characterised by a shift from top-down communication to a more inclusive, bottom-up strategy that prioritises dialogue over monologue.

The study also noted instances where CSR initiatives were imposed without sufficient consultation, leading to perceptions of tokenism and misalignment with community needs. Although ZPC's CSR efforts have addressed some community expectations, the tendency to impose certain programmes reflects a disconnect that undermines the effectiveness of its CSR strategy. To enhance

community engagement and ensure more meaningful CSR outcomes, ZPC may need to deepen its commitment to participatory decision-making and improve resource allocation to align more closely with community priorities.

This research focused exclusively on ZPC Kariba and three communities, leaving out other significant ZPC communities. Secondly, the sample size was relatively small, and key influential ZPC employees were not interviewed, which may limit the breadth of perspectives. Additionally, some community members were reluctant to participate in focus group discussions, fearing political implications. Future studies could address these limitations by exploring CSR across multiple ZESA subsidiaries and employing a mixed-methods approach to capture broader insights into how ZESA engages with its diverse stakeholder base across Zimbabwe. By investigating CSR's role within one of the nation's most influential power organisations, future research could provide valuable contributions to understanding CSR's impact on sustainable community development and stakeholder relations in economically constrained environments.

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