

**Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa: Mobile Telephone Network and Coca Cola  
examples of corporate social responsibility**

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**Abstract**

Covid-19 has become a major issue of academic and social discourses. Lives, livelihoods, communities and businesses have been seriously disrupted by its dramatic spread across the globe. Statistics reveal that 55 countries are affected in Africa and South Africa is the most affected with 1.55million out of 4.32million cases in Africa, as at April 8, 2021. The pandemic has prompted a number of responses from governments, individuals, business organisations and Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) to inventive and reduce the impact on public health and economic challenges. Although some of these were taken as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities, their contributions appeared to go beyond their traditional CSR efforts. This paper seeks to establish the extent of Coca-Cola and Mobile Telephone Network's (MTN) responses to the challenges of the pandemic in Nigeria and South Africa. Data used were extracted from grey literature and online search to examine the two companies' corporate social responsibility in health emergency situations.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus, Corporate Social Responsibility, Covid-19, Coca-Cola, MTN

## **Introduction**

Covid-19 pandemic probably represents one of the most critical challenges in current history. The economic hardship occasioned by Covid-19 and the associated lockdown or stay-at-home order over a three-month period, in the year 2020 has been inexplicable. Lives and businesses were put on hold (Richardson, 2020). Many, especially the lowly placed, lost their sources of income with the stay-at-home order. These have consequential effects in the society as there were reported increase in cases of armed robbery in Lagos, Nigeria and Johannesburg, South Africa. Some citizens of these countries also defied the lockdown order in the efforts to earn money for survival, arguing that the lockdown and the associated hunger might cause more deaths than the infection. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has advised on the preventive methods to curb and prevent the spread of the virus and save public health systems from its debilitating effects. These include hand washing, social distancing, and staying at home (Kalu, 2020).

Governments, corporate organisations, individuals and groups have also sought solutions from various dimensions, ranging from the management of the ailment through the provision of preventive and/or curative vaccines/medicines to the lockdown and palliative measures. Despite the promise by the Nigerian President to provide some palliative measures, such as the disbursing of funds and food items to those most affected, only a small proportion of the population affirmed that they received the support (Kalu, 2020). Recent development in Nigeria, occasioned by the ENDSARS protest among the youths showed that much of the palliatives were stacked away in warehouses and stores, and never reached the end users. In South Africa, the President was criticized for lack of decisive action to assuage the suffering of the people, following the announcement that most provinces would ease into a level 3 lockdown by the end of the month of May. However, palliative measure was one area through which some corporate organisations and individuals contributed to ameliorate the situation. World Bank Group, Wellcome Trust, Unilever and Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Coca-Cola, Airheads Volunteer Corps and Charity Foundations have responded to covid-19 through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plans.

Generally, organisations support their host environment and stakeholders through CSR. Beginning from philanthropy and thereafter business-society relations, the classical view of CSR refers basically to the contribution that a corporation or firm provided for solving social problems (Odongo, Jamin, Masese, Abuya, 2019). Corporate Social Responsibility means hold corporate organisation "...accountable for its action that affect the society, people, communities and their environment" (Lawrence and Webber, 2008 in Rodrigo, 2012, p.1). Perhaps a more comprehensive description was done by Athens University of Economics and Business which sees CSR "as a company's verifiable commitment to operating in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner that is transparent and increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders. These include investors, customers, employees, business partners, local communities, the environment and society". The aim is to promote a transparent and stakeholder-driven sustainable business action (Katsoulakos, Koutsodimou, Matraga & Williams, 2004, p.2). Onwuegbuzie (2009) argues that CSR is an attempt to incorporate public interest into corporate decision making so as to ensure that organisations give

back some of their profit to people and planet, which he referred to as triple bottom line. The guiding principles include community support, employee welfare, consumer satisfaction, environmental responsibility and sustainability. This entails working in collaboration with local communities, developing relationships with employees, customers and their families, and engaging in sustainable environmental conservation (Ismail, 2009).

This study explores the CSR stance of Coca-Cola and Mobile Telephone Network (henceforth, MTN Nigeria and South Africa) during the covid-19 era, using documentary method of data gathering and analysis (Mogalakwe, 2009). The broad search areas were covid-19 and CSR, covid-19 and Coca-Cola Nigeria and South Africa, covid-19 and MTN Nigeria and South Africa, information about covid-19 support globally and locally, news about CSR and covid-19 support updates in Nigeria and South Africa. The authors extracted information from journals and grey literature (through open Google data from June 2020 to August 2020). There were no specific search inclusion or exclusion criteria. Data was analysed thematically using descriptive approach. The paper is presented in eight sections as follows: the introduction along with objective and methodology, Coca-cola CSR policy and programmes, MTN's CSR policy and programmes, theoretical underpinning, global CSR practices, CSR practice in Covid-19 era, Coca-Cola and MTN Covid-19 responses and the final section which forms our discussion and conclusion.

### **Coca-cola CSR policy and programmes**

The Coca-Cola Company is an American multinational beverage corporation, founded in 1892. It has its headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia and produces, retails and markets nonalcoholic beverage concentrates and syrups (Coca-Cola, 2011). It is the largest beverage company in the world and operates in over 200 countries. The company has been described as “the best-known and biggest-selling soft drink in history” (Coca-Cola, 2019). The Coca-Cola Company first entered Africa in 1928 with its producing plant based in South Africa (Brand South Africa, 2006). The Coca-Cola drink made its way to Nigeria in 1951 when Nigerian Bottling Company Ltd (NBC) was incorporated as a subsidiary of the A.G. Leventis Group with the franchise to bottle and sell products of The Coca-Cola Company. Nigerian Bottling Company is a subsidiary of the Coca-Cola Company (Coca-Cola Nigeria, 2015), and it is rated as one of the largest bottlers of products of The Coca-Cola Company in the world (Coca-Cola, 2019).

The company's Sustainability Report comprises the details of her CSR programmes and initiatives, which dedicates at least 1% of its annual income for charity (Dudovskiy, 2015). Coca-Cola has a long term CSR programmes which it showcases annually in words and deeds (Essays, 2018). The company implements jealously the guiding tenets and variables of CSR, which are to guard the welfare of workers and community, protect the environment and society on the whole. The key areas of focus, as contained in the Corporate Social Responsibility Report (2010), of the company are employee development, consumer health, packaging and recycling, water stewardship, involvement of suppliers and energy and climate. For instance, Coca-Cola Nigeria in October 2018, sponsored/hosted stakeholders at a workshop titled: *Enabling Safe Birth in Nigeria*, which aimed to support the attainment of the SDG targets on maternal and newborn deaths reduction (Coca-Cola, 2019). This initiative was to strengthen selected public hospitals by enabling them acquire vital

maternal and neonatal medical equipment and supplies; train engineers and technicians in equipment handling and maintenance.

Through schools recycling programme, Coca-Cola Beverages South Africa (CCBSA) engineered the collection and creation of a revenue stream from discarded items, including PET bottles, paper, plastic and cans, which were sold for recycling and use. The programme was part of CCBSA's commitment to creating a waste-free South Africa and also in agreement with Coca-Cola's global mission for a World without Waste (WWW) by 2030. Between 2013 and 2018, 866 schools participated in the programme, 2, 324 tons of recyclable waste were collected, while 78 youth jobs were created. Other achievements included the enlisting of 700, 000 learners, and involvement of 12, 990 educators in the programme. Furthermore, 36 collectors were trained and supported, while 12, 223m<sup>3</sup> landfill space and 1850 tons of Carbon emissions have been saved since 2011. It is argued that Coca-Cola has judiciously applied the fundamental principles of the CSR theory in its programmes. Its strategy includes dialoging with all stakeholders and caring for the environment, while instituting controls and changing the rules and models where necessary to achieve desired results (Essays, 2018).

### **Mobile Telephone Network's Corporate Social Responsibility policy and programmes**

The MTN Group is a South African multinational telecommunications company that operates in 23 countries in Africa and the Middle East. It is the leading mobile operator in Africa, operating across 17 countries. It was established in 1994 in South Africa, as South Africa's first GSM payphones, which carried both voice and data. It later became MTN international in 1998 and in the year 2001, MTN South Africa foundation was inaugurated to "manage MTN's multimillion rand Corporate Social Investment (CSI) fund" (MTN, 2019). The MTN Nigeria started operations in 2001 as the first telecommunication company to make a commercial call on its GSM network, following the approval by Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC).

Mobile Telephone Network Nigeria created MTN Foundation (MTNF) in 2004, which serves as the delivery vehicle for MTN Nigeria's Corporate Social Investment programmes (Sanya, 2020). It is seen as a way to compensate the host environment. Its CSR initiatives are generally determined by local and regional sensitivities and other emerging challenges. The main areas of focus are education, health and culture (MTN, 2006). The MTN Group was a global sponsor of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa.

It is estimated that MTN spent over N11 billion in ten years on CSR activities in Nigeria in the areas of education, health, and economic empowerment (PM News, 2015). In support of education MTNF digitized school libraries and laboratories and provided scholarship schemes for those in music, science and technology. Its healthcare intervention was also far reaching, covering such facilities as mammography, dialysis and eye restoration machines across public hospitals in the country. Indeed, many people underwent free cataract surgeries, while others were given eye glasses and drug packs without charge. Under its economic empowerment programme, MTNF supported and built the capacity and skills of the disabled, widows, visually impaired students and other stakeholder groups.

In South Africa, MTN was recognised as being the most socially responsible corporate citizen, based on the outcome of the study entitled: “Keeping Good Company”, that was conducted by an independent research group called First Principles (MTN, 2011). Like MTN Nigeria, MTN SA Foundation focuses on Education, Health, Arts and Culture, and Entrepreneurial Development. It is estimated that R600 million has so far been spent in these spheres. MTN South Africa introduced Schools Connectivity Programme to enhance the quality of education and access to information technology for learners in rural areas. Since inception in 2002, 183 multimedia centres have been established in this regard. Among the equipment provided were computers, printers, computer workstations, data projectors, interactive white boards, DStv satellite dishes and data cards. In collaboration with South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), MTN South Africa continued to sponsor *Beat It*, a national television programme that addresses HIV/AIDS-related issues in the country. It had a large viewership of 11.5 million in 2006 (MTN, 2006). It must be noted that HIV/AIDS is a major health challenge in South Africa.

Under arts and culture projects, the MTN foundation supported Schools Art Awards, launched a 300-page art book, which showcased artists and art works from the Group’s corporate collection. Part of the MTN art collection were a line of 13 essays by leading writers, art historians, anthropologists and curators as well as the colour images of both African and South African artworks. Under entrepreneurship programme, the foundation aimed to empower women entrepreneurs through training and workshops. Within the same project, up to 1, 050 women entrepreneurs were educated and trained and 30 business centres established.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

This study is anchored on Stakeholder theory. This theory of social responsibility opines that an organisation must consider the interests of all stakeholders, including stockholders, employees, customers, suppliers, creditors, and local community in its affairs. Edward R. Freeman was the key proponent of this theory. The theory is built on the premise that corporations are established to meet the diverse interests and concerns of a multiplicity of stakeholders (Raimi, 2017). Indeed, the major objective of any corporation is to protect and balance the interests of diverse publics in its operations (Brin & Nehme, 2019). In this way, it maintains a strong interrelation and interconnection with community and business components (Brin & Nehme, 2019).

Stakeholder theory postulates that Corporate Social Responsibility is pursued in order to understand and satisfy stakeholders. It prescribes stakeholder engagement as a viable means to ensure that the interests, sensitivities and concerns of all stakeholders are catered for in their varying operations (Ditlev-Simonsen and Midttun, 2011, p.8). It uses a bottom-up approach to business, which takes cognizance of the views and aspirations of the stakeholders in decision-making process (Freeman, 2018). “The purpose of the firm, underneath this theory, is to maximize profit on a collective bottom line, with profit defined not as money but as human welfare. What’s certain is that stakeholder theory obligates corporate directors to appeal to all sides and balance everyone’s interests and welfare in the name of maximizing benefits across the spectrum of those whose lives are touched by the business” (Brusseau, 2012 :14).

This study employs the above theory to capture the dynamics and operational processes of Coca-Cola and MTN and their relationships with diverse stakeholders in so far as their CSR policies are concerned. The aim is to ensure that both the internal and external publics are considered while making covid-19 exigencies plan. In other words, the study tries to ascertain if the two companies moved beyond their original CSR policy dimensions to incorporate other challenges occasioned by covid-19, in order to assuage the suffering of their publics. Ordinarily, the companies had defined domains enshrined in their policies, as well as issues to be covered in discharging their CSR.

### **Global Corporate Social Responsibility practices**

CSR which at its early origin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was based essentially on the religious principles or philanthropy of a company's founder, has metamorphosed into a professional business. Integrating CSR into the core of a company is crucial to its success. CSR is anchored on the fundamental principle of organisational responsibility to stakeholders, which has become central to any business strategy and outlines how businesses can make positive impact in society. This is done to show corporate commitment towards the well-being of the host environment. In the coronavirus era, CSR is seen as "how companies identify and manage the most material and salient human rights, social, environmental, and governance risks and opportunities for their business" (Buckholtz, 2020, p.1). Companies are expected to explore how to support those who are most vulnerable by harnessing core business capabilities as well as corporate philanthropy and community engagement through partnerships with government and non-governmental organizations, as well as policy dialogue.

Studies (Maigman and Ralston, 2002; Aguilera, 2006; Forte, 2013) have shown that countries differ in their perception of CSR. Williams and Aguilera (2006) argue that the reason may be found in the absence of a universally accepted definition of CSR. Maigman and Ralston's (2002) found that businesses in the U.S., U.K., the Netherlands, and France attribute different levels of importance to social responsibility. For instance, the performance-driven perspective, along with the stakeholder-driven view, was popular in the U.K., while the value-driven approach predominated in the U.S. In France and the Netherlands, however, fewer businesses were found by the authors to have mentioned CSR. Nevertheless, India has made corporate social responsibility (CSR) mandatory. They identified investments in such critical areas as education, poverty alleviation and gender sensitivity as the major parameters for measuring CSR compliance (India Briefing, 2020).

Results from a study of 5000 Vietnamese enterprises on firm-level productivity effects of corporate social responsibility (CSR), showed that there is a positive relationship between CSR engagement and firm efficiency. This positive effect is largely driven by community-level CSR, such as community-based education, local poverty alleviation, health and environmental protection. Firms that were found to have more propensity to engage in socially responsible actions at the local community-level were those that were reliant on the local economy. Examples included those firms that sourced inputs at the district level and had most customers within the local community. (Newman, Rand, Tarp and Trifkovic, 2020).

In Kenya, a study to examine the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility on Corporate-Society Relations using in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussion (FGD), observation and visual sociology, found that CSR programmes generally impacted positively on the community (Odongo et al, 2019). A World Bank survey in 2016 (in Odongo et al, 2016) on the effect of CSR and other social welfare programmes in Kenya found that the programmes significantly reduced human suffering by supporting day to day basic needs such as food and healthcare. This result is also reinforced by the findings of Bernnet (2000) who wrote that CSR projects support community efforts to achieve better quality of life (QOL). It was also noted that in Kenya just like Nigeria, South Africa and many other countries, companies emphasize on Community-focused CSR Projects and Livelihood Programmes such as agriculture and animal husbandry as a way of improving the local community's economic conditions (Odongo et al, 2019).

Results obtained from qualitative analysis of the effects of CSR in Bolivia, showed that some firms focus mainly on eco-friendly practices, as against ethical conducts such as responsible labour practices. Thus, Bolivian firms focus more on environmental than social CSR practices. In the agribusiness industry, CSR practices appear inclusive as small firms are allowed to participate in the market. Nevertheless, international companies, such as Unilever and The Coca-Cola Company are some of the actors in CSR practices in Bolivia. Given the centrality of the CSR programmes of the above organisations along with those of Bata to the Bolivian society, the authors suggested that CSR practices in Bolivia should be led by big multinational organizations (Torrico et al, 2018).

### **Corporate Social Responsibility practice in covid-19 era**

The declaration of coronavirus as a global pandemic by WHO on March 11, 2020 triggered new ways of service delivery. The pandemic prompted a number of responses from governments, individuals, businesses and institutions to deliberate on inventive ways to reduce the impact on public health and economic activities and processes. Governments, companies and businesses have expended and donated funds towards the relief of the pandemic as part of CSR activity. Many "Big names in the world are sending medical help and others donating cash" (World Economic Forum, 2020, p.2).

The Indian Ministry of Corporate Affairs identified the main criteria for CSR activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Among them are "contributions made to state disaster management authority to fight against Covid-19, spending on Covid-19 related activities like preventive health care and sanitation and any ex-gratia paid to temporary/casual workers over and above their daily wages" (The Economic Times, 2020, p.1). In France, factories that produce luxury goods (perfumes and make-up) like LVMH, have ventured into the hand-sanitizer sector to fight COVID-19. Wall Street Journal reported that large corporations are supporting SMEs in the United States during the difficult time. Amazon announced a \$5 million relief fund for small businesses close to its headquarters, while Google pledged \$1 million to organizations in Mountain View, California, affected by the virus. Furthermore, Facebook and Apple committed \$20 million and \$15 million respectively to support coronavirus relief efforts (World Economic Forum, 2020), while Unilever donated free sanitizer, soap, bleach and food worth €100 million to the world's neediest. Through his foundation, Jack Ma, the billionaire founder of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba, has donated 1.1 million

testing kits, 6 million masks, and 60,000 protective suits and face shields, to the African continent (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Indeed, the current pandemic offers a wide range of opportunities to those with dynamic attitude to CSR. Some companies remodeled their processes and facilities to enable them contribute towards assuaging the sufferings of the people during the period. For instance:

UK manufacturing companies transformed their factories to produce ventilators, personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitizer, and so on, with some of them donating, instead of selling, these products. Also in the UK, London's ExCeL exhibition centre – which usually hosts lifestyle shows and business conferences – has been converted into a temporary hospital with capacity for 4,000 beds with oxygen and ventilators (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Telecommunications giant Vodafone introduced free access to unlimited mobile data for many of its pay monthly customers and upgraded its vulnerable pay monthly customers to unlimited data offer for free (BBC, 2020).

Supermarkets in the UK have allocated opening hours specifically for the elderly and NHS workers, and donated Easter eggs and general food to food banks and charitable organizations. Companies donated their original commercial campaign airtime to promote good causes. Banks waived interest on overdrafts over a period of time. And the list goes on. (He & Harris, 2020).

In Nigeria, 107 Nigerian companies and notable individuals donated the sum of N25.8 billion as a relief fund to combat coronavirus in the country (Benson, 2020). Among the highest individual donors were Abdul Samad Rabiu, the founder of BUA Group and Aliko Dangote, Africa's wealthiest man (CovidFund Tracka, 2020).

There were also local philanthropic donations, several in kind and cash made to Nigerian government from multilateral aid agencies. A number of companies made donations in form of palliatives to their stakeholders during covid-19 lockdown, thus a good number of private sector responded positively towards the covid-19 lockdown challenge. They include: First Bank which along with other partners promoted e-learning for Nigerians, Arik Air palliatives in the form of food items to Mafoluku and Aringbanla Lagos communities, as part of CSR (Channels TV news, May 26). Flour Mills Nigeria Limited donated food items as palliative to Lagos, Ekiti, Kaduna, Cross Rivers, Ogun, Niger and Edo states (Press Release, 2020).

Apart from government intervention in South Africa, there were also many private sector responses to covid-19 and up to R500million or \$26 billion was expended in the process (Parker, 2020). These support came in different forms such as, cash donations, supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), food supplies during lockdown, free medical services and supplies, free communication and/or low data cost, and payment relief methods. These included the financial sector such as Absa, FirstRand, FNB, Nedbank, Standard Bank and Old Mutual Limited. Other responses were through the manufacturers and retailers like South African Breweries, Siemens, Investec, Massmart, Sasol, Transnet, Sappi, AngloGold Ashanti, Distell, Pepkor, Pick n Pay, Woolworth, etc. Further contributions came from telecom companies and health sector like MTN, Telkom, Vodacom, SAPREF, Discovery Health- virtual healthcare platform.

### **Coca-cola and MTN Covid-19 responses**

The Coca-Cola group decided to provide up to \$100 million covid-19 support to peoples the world over, following the ‘government-mandated shutdowns’ and stay-at-home order, which resulted in decrease of production, that culminated in other susceptibilities such as burdened healthcare service, food scarcity and poor supply chains (Coca-Cola, 2020). The African Coca-Cola group, otherwise known as bottling partners of the global Coca-Cola System and Foundation, responded to the war against the coronavirus through diverse involvements. These included \$13-million relief support to the African continent during the various stages of the lockdown (Salau, 2020; APO, 2020). Some other contributions were in the form of medical supplies and food parcel deliveries, manufacturing and distribution of PPE.

The Coca-Cola Company deployed its business strategy and marketing resources to ease the challenges associated with the early phases of COVID-19 pandemic. These included bill boards, beverage packaging and social media channels to share common concern and solidarity with the people. In other words, they empathized with the people, pointing out that “we are all in this together”. (Coca-Cola, 2020). The company put “commercial advertising of Coca-Cola and all their brands on hold, from April till further notice, and channeled the support towards COVID-19 communication, provision of protective kits and drinks for health workers” (Yahaya, 2020, p.2). They used their committed media assets, as well as social media handle to help boost public sensitization on preventive practices as well as promote hope and optimism among the public (Okeowo, 2020). Furthermore, the company has committed approximately \$17m across Africa through various phases of the pandemic under the ‘...In this Together’ initiative.

In Nigeria, the Coca-Cola System donated material items to the federal and state governments during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also made cash and kind contributions through and to international agencies, customers and staff members. In the attempt to provide hydration and nourishment for health workers and patients at the Isolation and Treatment Centres across the country, the Coca-Cola Company committed over 13 million centiliters of its beverages, including Eva premium table water and other soft drinks in support of covid-19 efforts (Okeowo, 2020).

In addition to the donation of beverages, the NBC collaborated with major restaurant partners to provide meals to healthcare professionals and others fighting on the frontlines. A good example included the provision of an intervention fund to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), to increase public sensitization and acquire vital protective kits such as medical masks, face shields, hand gloves and hand sanitizers, in the critical areas of the country (Coca-Cola, 2020).

As part of their contributions also, the Coca-Cola systems resolved to support the Federal Ministry of Health to move essential materials for Coronavirus containment to different locations across the country using their distribution trucks. Following the increased need for hand sanitizer, Nigerian Bottling Company converted some of their technical facilities to produce, in line with World Health Organization (WHO) standard, litres of alcohol base sanitizer that were freely distributed to vulnerable groups and governments (Salau, 2020).

In its commitment to consumer protection as well as create an avenue that enabled its customers to operate in line with the social distancing policy of government, the Coca-Cola systems collaborated with a leading e-commerce platform, Jumia, to provide free delivery of Coca-Cola beverage products to consumers in states under partial or total lockdown (Editor, 2020). In South Africa, Coca-Cola donated \$1.2 million to the solidarity Fund to provide humanitarian relief, medical equipment, sanitation supplies and water to medical workers and vulnerable communities. They worked with some NGOs and social enterprises like Gift of the Givers and National Disaster Management agencies to provide support in the form of food packages for vulnerable persons, whose livelihood systems have been dislocated as a result of the lockdown and restrictions (Coca-Cola, 2020A).

Coca-Cola South Africa distributed 9000 cartons of 2L water with food parcels to Ekurhuleni Communities during lockdown. The Managing Director of Coca-Cola Beverages SA (CCBSA), Velaphi Ratshefola, led the distribution of more than 2 000 food parcels to registered waste pickers in Gauteng. The company also channeled her production effort to alcohol production to help industries manufacture more hand sanitizer. They also used their trucks to transport the products to the remotest corners of the country.

Like Coca-Cola, MTN also supported the governments and its customers in containing the spread of the deadly virus in both countries. MTN Nigeria reportedly “unveiled its Y'ello Hope Package and announced over N2 billion worth of support to various government and health agencies. The breakdown of MTN’s covid-19 intervention programme showed that they were delimited into two major categories - service delivery costs and hardware deployment. Among them were: 300 free SMS to every MTN user for 3 months, MTN Foundation N500 million intervention for medical needs, support to Nigeria Governors' Forum worth N500, 000,000 for airtime, data and analytics and Free Cash2Cash Transaction fees on MTN Mobile Money for one month for 800,000 users at N100 per transaction at the cost of N80, 000,000 (MTN Nigeria, 2020). The MTN covid-19 intervention also included values other than monetary. For instance, some measures were introduced across the group by MTN management to “flatten the curve”, in line with global strategy. The measures include:

- Continued focus on hygiene and quarantine;
- Restriction on international and domestic travel;
- Temperature screening at all locations;
- Introduction of “work from home” policy;
- Provision of contact email (covid19@mtn.com) to address emerging concerns.

In summary, MTN group has been working on a few key themes in order to contain the virus. These include (1) reducing the transmission of the virus through working from home, self-isolation and hygiene (2) keeping people safe by providing thermal scanners at our office facilities (3) keeping the networks up and running (4) helping people not to transact in physical cash through reduced fees and waiver on Mobile Money transactions and key educational sites, like universities.

Similar intervention was carried out in South Africa. To finance a 40 million rand (\$2.2 million) emergency fund for staff affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, members of the executive of MTN South Africa pledged nearly a third of their salaries and fees for three months. This donation constituted

a part of the 250-million-rand relief effort aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus across its 21 markets. MTN also pledged to support 10-million-rand government fund and invested 150 million rand in the Y'ello Hope Package for customers, which included free SMS services, the waiving of fees for certain mobile money transactions, discounted calling during off-peak periods, zero-rating of certain health, social services and educational sites and payment concessions to our business customers (Amogelangmaluleka, 2020; Ikade, 2020). MTN focused on five intervention initiatives namely: employees, customers, vulnerable groups, contributions to the South African Government's Solidarity Fund, and participation in industry interventions (Telecompaper, 2020).

In response to COVID-19 efforts, MTN Group has contributed R42 million to Government Relief Funds. They were:

- introduction of MTN MoMo (mobile money) social media bundles and waiving of MoMo cash-in fees during the Covid-19 lock-down;
- providing IT support to Gauteng provincial government to curb Covid-19;
- contributing to government relief funds to support businesses, the jobless, and the provision of food, medicine and services (amogelangmaluleka, 2020);
- donation of 5,000 smartphones to the Limpopo Provincial Department of Health, each of which was loaded with 3GB of data, for distribution to field workers, for tests and contact tracing;
- delivery to provincial departments of health across all the nine provinces, 18,000 bottles of hand sanitizer and 30,800 face masks amounting to R1.9 million (Telecompaper, 2020).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In order to fully understand this discourse, we anchored our study on two main forms of dialogue, using the stakeholder theory. The first is an evaluation of CSR practices of the companies as enshrined in their CSR policies and documented by media or other literary sources. The second is an appraisal of the new trends in CSR practices by both companies, occasioned by covid-19 pandemic. Put in another way, do we see these efforts as mere corporate social responsibility or an effort towards solving an emergency or social problem of a sort? The answers to these puzzles provide an opportunity of reinterpreting and redefining CSR.

A cursory look at the data collected from both countries showed that the two companies went beyond their traditional CSR policies in scope and contents, in their attempts to find succor to the problem created by covid-19 pandemic. Thus, in line with the stakeholder theory, both companies attempted to share the concerns and aspirations of their diverse publics during the pandemic, the vested economic interests of the company notwithstanding. The Coca-Cola Company lent its distribution, production, and marketing capacities, alongside direct funding, to stem the tide of covid-19 in many African countries, including Nigeria and South Africa. They suspended all Coca-Cola brand advertisements in the media and redeployed the media resources to boost public sensitization on preventive practices, uplifted messages of solidarity and promoted crucial information on covid-19 precaution for the sake of health authorities. They made cash donations to local and international NGOs and solidarity funds to support people against the coronavirus. Furthermore, they provided medical equipment and services, food packages, 3-D printed face masks and

other PPEs; provided alcohol-based hand sanitizer for free distribution to governments and vulnerable communities, as well as beverages for care assistant and patients in treatment and isolation centres; distributed food parcels to vulnerable group and others, whose sources of livelihood were impacted by the lockdown and other restrictions.

Similarly, MTN Nigeria and South Africa were supportive of their stakeholders in the containment of the virus spread through hardware deployment and reduced service delivery costs. The five MTN intervention initiatives were addressed in the course of covid-19 response. MTN management promised its stakeholders that the ‘networks would be up and running’, to ensure adequate communication, in view of the limitations of physical movement necessitated by the lockdown. In order to deal with the hike in data traffic, MTN had to apply to telecoms regulator for more spectrum. They worked to contain the virus transmission by encouraging staff to work from home and screening of temperature at MTN offices. Other areas of intervention included: (a) free text messaging to all MTN customers for three months; (b) free cash2cash transaction fees on MTN mobile money; (c) general payment waivers, reduction and/or discounts on services offered to their clients; (d) disbursement of funds to Nigerian and South African governments in support of efforts geared towards the containment of the virus and (e) salary sacrifices by the executives and other staff, for three months to finance emergency fund for staff of MTN South Africa affected by the coronavirus.

What has been done in the foregoing was to examine the CSR practices of the two companies under study viz-a-viz their actions during the lockdown and associated hardships occasioned by covid-19 pandemic. The results revealed that the two companies remodeled and redefined some of their services and processes, to enable them cater for the exigencies suffered by their varying stakeholders. For instance, the Coca-Cola rechanneled its alcohol production facility to produce hand sanitizer and also delivered their products without any transport charge to recipients. On the other hand, MTN provided free text messaging to its customers during the lockdown. It also gave waiver and discounted charges on some of their services. These two companies also made huge cash donations in support of covid-19 relief efforts. In essence they expanded their protocols beyond the traditional CSR processes to actualize these results.

There is no doubt that covid-19 has brought ingenuity in the society despite its odds. Although the companies were seen to be doing well to stakeholders before the pandemic, the new normal has made them to open up more. The havoc wrecked by the pandemic and the associated restrictions of mobility and social distancing, have made people to think outside the box. Businesses and individuals are encouraged to improve on the innovation engendered by covid-19 and explore further avenues to develop and improve human wellbeing. Why not embrace the change in the new normal?

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