

PUTTING HERSHEY'S CSR REPORT IN PERSPECTIVE

Blog Entry by [Madeline Ravich](#) in [Corporate Social Responsibility](#)
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Over the past week, I have seen a few blog posts about Hershey's first CSR report, which is hot off the presses. Not surprisingly, the viewpoints represented in these posts vary. For example, my Justmeans co-blogger Akhila Vijayaraghavan [glows with praise](#), concluding her post by saying "With so many things going for them, the first CSR report sure is a sweet beginning for the Hershey company." But Elaine Cohen, who regularly critiques CSR reports, takes [a different perspective](#), underscoring the tension between the report offered by Hershey and a reactionary report offered up by a group of highly critical NGO stakeholders. While Elaine is more balanced than critical, she does raise good questions about how meaningful Hershey's new report actually is.

I happen to have some perspective on this issue because of a project I conducted in business school relating to the issue human rights abuses in cocoa supply chains. This is a juicy topic which has received significant attention over the years to the point that the leading cocoa companies have had to invest in substantial behind-the-scene efforts, if for no other reason than to keep governments and NGO groups at bay. But the types of issues under discussion--- especially the question of whether child labor is actually wrong in all situations--- are complicated and controversial to the point that cocoa companies have often held back in their public discussion in order to avoid the type of controversy they were trying to suppress in the first place. As a result, while significant funds have been invested in finding industry-wide solutions to these issues, the major cocoa companies have been selective in what they have chosen to discuss publicly in CSR reports. Perhaps part of the reason is that some of the most significant efforts mounted by the major confectionary companies cannot be presented as factors that differentiate their companies from their peers.

While this is true across the board, it is also worth noting that Hershey, which is among the four leading chocolate companies, trails behind its competitors in talking about its CSR. What Akhila terms "a sweet beginning" could be seen as a token effort late in the game. After all, while competitors like Cadbury, Nestle, and Mars can be accused of being selective in what they have discussed publicly, they have in fact established traditions of publishing CSR reports and websites reflecting suites of CSR activities with some depth.

Although there is much more to say about this issue and Hershey's new CSR report, I will stop here and conclude by asserting that meaningful commentaries on CSR reports require an understanding of the larger context within which the company operates. In fact, I would contend that the initiatives that an individual corporation are undertaking to improve its CSR profile are nearly impossible to evaluate in the absence of information about what peer corporations are doing to address the same CSR issues. But am I alone in holding this point of view?

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