The business community is starting to recognise that children and young people are their responsibility, and their business

By David Bull, Executive Director of UNICEF UK

The world is young. Currently one third of the world’s population are children. That’s 2.2 billion people below the age of 18. The vast majority of these youngsters live in new and emerging markets, the places where many business operations are based, and where future economic growth is greatest. Yet while an increasing number of those businesses are developing CSR strategies, few of them make explicit reference to the particular needs, challenges and rights of children and young people. Children and young people are key stakeholders in almost all businesses. Almost every activity a business undertakes has an impact in some way on children’s lives and livelihoods whether through employment practices, supply chains, product safety, marketing practices or their impact on the environment. Yet, most annual CSR reports have little or no mention of these key stakeholders.

In the midst of the current financial and economic crisis, the call for ‘responsible capitalism’ has become a prominent public and political issue. But what about the business rationale? The business case for a more child focused approach to CSR is clear. Today’s consumers and shareholders are becoming more aware than ever before of the social as well as environmental impact of business. Recent research (1) demonstrates that businesses which focus on children within the workplace, marketplace and community, throughout their value chain, have improved staff retention and have more engaged employees. These businesses face less reputational risk and build trust from customers, employees and shareholders.

Children and young people are the workers, consumers, citizens, parents and business leaders of today and tomorrow. By focussing on children and supporting their rights, businesses are creating a more stable and sustainable future, new and expanding markets for products and services, educating their next workforce or influencing tomorrow’s campaigners and consumers and enhancing their brand and reputation.
Added to this overwhelming business case is a moral one also. Child focused CSR is right thing to do. Businesses have a duty to think about how they can make a positive impact on children. Increasingly leading businesses recognise that children are indeed the next business agenda. More and more companies are approaching and working with UNICEF as a means to ensure that children and young people are a key part of their sustainability strategies, recognising that as the world’s leading children’s organisation, our global expertise can bring real benefit to their work. Trailblazing companies such as Barclays, IKEA and Marks and Spencer a long time ago moved away from the purely philanthropic model of supporting children globally by donating money, to one which utilises their skills, expertise and knowledge, As well as their crucial funds and engages their people in support of the young in the communities they impact. This is the right thing for a business to do ethically and also the smart thing. By considering children, companies naturally address issues linked to social impact, supply chains and environmental impact. For example, Marks and Spencer’s innovative partnership with UNICEF, launched in 2011, not only has a huge positive impact on children in Bangladesh by investing in fundamental UNICEF work within a community that forms a key part of their supply chain, it also helps drive innovation through the company’s recycling push on plastic hangers in store.

In a world full of countless business principles and guidelines, one clear and shocking omission has been a set of guidelines to help businesses to consider their impact ON over 1/3 of the world’s population. With the launch of the Child Rights and Business Principles, in which UNICEF is a key partner, that omission has been addressed. For the first time ever, a comprehensive set of guidelines exists to provide a holistic approach to children.

So, when asked the question, ‘why are children the business of business?’ The answer is simple; the world is young and young people are at the heart of your company’s future. Children represent your business present, and your business future.

(1) http://www.unprme.org/resource-docs/ResearchonBusinessCaseforCRBPI.pdf