

Access Bank continues to put principles ahead of profit

"If the global Sustainable Development Goals are to be achieved, the role of financial institutions like Access Bank cannot be underplayed."

- Word by TBC

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires a significant amount of capital which financial markets have access to. Thus, Financial Institutions (FIs) around the world have begun to develop sustainable finance tools to mobilise their funds.

The United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI) is a platform which possesses relevant insight into the need for greater collaboration among Public and Private sector organizations to scale-up and promote sustainable financing on an international level. As a result of this, the institution acts as a platform for facilitating exchanges and promoting adherence to the 6 Principles of Responsible Banking by banks around the world.

These Principles which include aligning business strategies with individual needs and society's goals; consulting with relevant stakeholders and promoting transparency, among others, aim to provide the Banking industry with a single framework that embeds sustainability within all business areas of every bank, in line with the Paris Climate Agreement. Also, the UNEP FI Principles provide the rigorous framework that Financial Institutions need to propel their operations.

While public funding is integral to the advancement of nations, it is impossible for governments and non-governmental organisations to cover the cost of sustainable development alone. Private sector organisations represent a significant and influential part of any economy and should therefore play a more significant role.

At Access Bank Plc., we recognise the urgency of developmental issues and how an emphasis on sustainability will lead to a win-win situation for all stakeholders. This is why we will continue to contribute to the sustainability effort in Nigeria.

The Importance of Financial Institutions in Sustainability

Traditionally, banks were rarely given a seat at the proverbial sustainability table. However, excluding financiers from the global movement hindered the much-needed mass reorganisation of societies.

Impact organisations are important to do the groundwork, but if the finance sector continues to finance projects and organisations that are harmful to the environment, the economy and citizens, it will become increasingly difficult to achieve and maintain the change we desire.

In Nigeria we are almost in the sixth year of our country-specific guideline – the Nigerian Sustainable Banking Principles – which regulates the actions of the Banking sector through the Central Bank of Nigeria, while taking our particular operating context into consideration.

Realising the impact that could be made from altering our strategy and business practices, Access Bank rooted its identity in sustainability about 11 years ago, before it was mandated with the Principles.

Sustainability at Access Bank

As key stakeholders in the economic sustainability effort, we believe that it is important for the products and services of Financial Institutions to cater to the micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises which have long served as important drivers of the Nigerian economy.

The Bank has been able to exhibit this belief through several laudable initiatives. For example, Access Bank hosts a cloud-based Applications Management Platform for funding bodies to manage grants and funding applications; provide a platform for learning regarding 'grantsmanship'; as well as provide a service for knowledge sharing and collaboration among NGOs and private firms.

Likewise, the Bank recently held a successful WomenPreneur Pitch-A-Ton which received thousands of applicants. It was the first women-in-business support initiative of its kind in the industry.

Social sustainability is often termed as a precondition for the other 2 pillars of sustainability, thus we place a huge emphasis on harnessing the capacity of all employees and stakeholders. Within the Bank, each employee has countless opportunities to participate in nation building throughout the year. One of the most active and engaging ways that employees do this is through the Employee Volunteering Scheme which has become enormously popular, as it gives staff the avenue to execute impactful projects from start to finish.

Through this scheme, every employee guided by the Sustainability unit, practices participatory development by supporting any community or cause of their choice and partnering with the beneficiaries of such communities to shape the project.

Alongside the Employee Volunteering Scheme, dedicated members of staff are inducted into a Sustainability Champions Network. As at now, there are currently over 1,700 Sustainability Champions throughout the Bank that are tasked with monthly activities to ensure their continuous influence on various spheres of society.

Development is so important to the Bank's identity that it dedicates one percent of its profit before tax to all sustainability projects and partnerships. A trained sustainability unit, headed by top management staff, oversees these initiatives.

On the environmental front, the Bank recently issued Africa's first-ever Corporate Bonds Initiative-certified corporate Green Bond – a NGN15bn (\$41.3m) bond that will be used to support climate-friendly projects. It also provides a viable asset class for environmentally friendly investors to meet their objectives of reducing carbon emissions and finding opportunities in the fast-developing low-carbon economy.

Access Bank will continue to prioritise environmental, social and governance considerations within all its decision-making processes. Beginning at the executive level, commitment towards sustainability is expressed through each employee at Access Bank as it is a value that lies at the heart of every activity and project undertaken by the bank.