

Coca-Cola vs. Karma Cola: An Analysis of Sustainability Practices in the Soft Drink Industry

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Introduction

In order to face the growing social and environmental challenges of the 21st century, it is critical that businesses not only minimize their negative impact but also actively seek to improve the world we live in. By comparing specific examples of how companies are incorporating sustainability into their business, we can see what various levels of sustainable development exist and what more could be done to integrate sustainable principles. This paper investigates the beverage industry by comparing Coca-Cola with Karma Cola and analyzing the impact of their sustainability initiatives and business models.

Method

The “Doughnut Model” proposed by Kate Raworth (2012) defines a framework for sustainable development encompassing social and environmental goals to ensure the well-being of humanity while still protecting the earth’s systems that we depend on. This model outlines this donut as a “safe and just space for humanity,” bounded by an ecological ceiling that we must not cross to preserve Earth’s natural state and a social foundation to meet essential human needs. The ecological ceiling consists of the nine environmental stresses from the planetary boundary model including climate change, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, nitrogen and phosphorus loading, freshwater withdrawals, land conversion, biodiversity loss, air pollution, and ozone depletion. The twelve social categories – food security, health, education, income and work, peace and justice, political voice, social equity, gender equality, housing, networks, energy, and water – aim to protect society from critical human deprivations, building upon the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals set out in 2016. To evaluate contributions towards sustainability, each company will be giving a rating from 1 to 10 for each of the categories in the donut model, where 1 is a negative impact, 5 is neutral and 10 is positive.

Using this, we can further evaluate the impact of a company’s sustainability development by using the business sustainability typology presented by Dyllick and Muff (2016) that categorizes businesses into BST 1.0, 2.0, or 3.0 depending on the relevance and contribution to solving sustainability issues. BST 1.0 and 2.0 are both driven by economic purposes to generate shareholder value, with BST 2.0 seeking a more ambitious approach than 1.0 and recognizing the need to solve both social and environmental issues. A ‘truly sustainable’ business lies in the 3.0 category, with an integrated bottom-line approach that “translates sustainability challenges into business opportunities” (p. 166) that seek to create a positive impact in society and the environment. By determining which of these BST typologies a company operates in, we can easily compare companies’ progress towards business sustainability.

Case Analysis

Coca Cola, founded in 1886 by John Pemberton in Atlanta, Georgia, is the leading company in the industry, with over 225 bottling partners, 900 bottling plants, and distributing over 1.9 billion servings a day worldwide to consumers (The Coca-Cola Company, 2022). Several sustainability initiatives have been introduced in the last few decades, including the establishment of the Coca-Cola Foundation in 1984 to serve “women, water, and well-being,” the 5by20 initiative to enable economic empowerment of 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2020, and 100% water replenishment goals. Karma Cola was founded in 2010 with a specific goal to give back to the people of Sierra Leone who discovered the cola nut. With the purpose of creating a company that was “good for the land, good for the people who grow them, and good for the people who consume them” (Karma Drinks), Karma

Cola has incorporated sustainability into its core business principles from its inception, including efforts to resurrect regenerative farming and funding entrepreneurship and education in Sierra Leone.

Coca-Cola

Social Foundation

Water. Coca Cola has been a pioneer in water replenishment, not only by replenishing all of the water they use in their products, but also providing significant water access for those in water-scarce communities. From 2008 to 2020, the Coca-Cola Foundation's initiative RAIN (Replenish Africa Initiative) has provided clean water access to over 6 million people across 41 countries, launching projects focused on water and sanitation, productive water use, and watershed protection. These initiatives have resulted in far-reaching improvements in health, livelihood, and resilience. Access to water empowered over 400,000 women by saving them time for water collection and provided over 1,200 schools with clean water, sanitation facilities, and hygiene training (The Coca-Cola Company, 2020). Improved access to water and sanitation has also reduced the risk of disease and improved agricultural production, which is essential to the economic development of these regions.

Gender Equality. Coca-Cola (2020) announced the 5by20 initiative in 2010 to “enable the economic empowerment of 5 million women entrepreneurs by the end of 2020” (p. 11). This goal was surpassed, with over 6 million women entrepreneurs around the world enabled and 400,000 women empowered through water stewardship programs. A study by Ipsos (Jones, M., Love, K., Klein, M., 2018) found that water stewardship programs create a ‘ripple effect’ that generates pathways to women’s empowerment. Additionally, Coca-Cola Azerbaijan received the ‘2020 U.S. Secretary of State’s Award for Corporate Excellence (ACE)’ for its efforts to improve women’s economic empowerment in Azerbaijan (U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, 2021). Coca-Cola has also been included in Bloomberg’s Gender Equality Index (2022), distinguishing it as a leader of gender equality in the workplace. 34% of Coca-Cola’s (2020) leadership roles are occupied by women, much higher than the food and beverage manufacturing average of 16%, but still lower than the goal of 50-50 representation (Berry, 2020).

Health. Employee safety and health has been a major focus for Coca-Cola, setting a goal to “achieve zero work-related injuries and illnesses” and implementing Coca-Cola Operating Requirements to improve employee safety and reduce risks in the workplace. From 2012 to 2020, Lost Time Incident Rate decreased drastically from 2.3 to 0.34 (The Coca-Cola Company, 2020), much lower than the soft drink manufacturing industry average of 5.3, as reported by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021). In terms of its drinks, Coca-Cola is transforming their portfolio to reduce sugar and introduce more nutritious beverages. Around 125,000 tons of added sugar was removed from its products due to a recipe change, and around 36% of its portfolio is now low- or no-sugar. However, despite its efforts to reduce sugar, a study in the Public Health Nutrition journal by Serodio, P., Ruskin, G., McKee, M., & Stuckler, D. (2020) reports that Coca-Cola funded research in 2015 to downplay the link between sugar and obesity and promote lack of exercise as the leading cause of America’s obesity problem. Additionally, the presence of artificial ingredients led to a lawsuit against the company due to its branding as a “natural” drink, as many of its chemicals including ‘caramel coloring’ and high fructose corn syrup have been known to cause adverse health effects (Ettinger, 2018).

Income and Work. Coca Cola has worked to ensure human rights throughout its workplaces and supply chain, establishing a Human Rights Policy to ensure their commitment to this principle. A goal was set in 2003 to achieve 98% compliance with this policy by the end of 2020, but this goal was not

met as only 93% of facilities and 90% of bottlers were in compliance (The Coca-Cola Company, 2020). Furthermore, the organization IUF, which works to protect trade unions, has spoken out against human rights violations by Coca Cola, such as denying workers' rights to unionize in Haiti and shifting production in Ireland away from strongly unionized plants and rejecting collective bargaining rights of its workers, among others (IUF).

Social Equity. In addition to its 5by20 initiative to economically empower women throughout the globe, Coca Cola has announced a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout its company. In 2020, the foundation donated \$4.7 million to 10 social justice organizations in the US and spent around \$800 million to 'diverse suppliers.' Established in 2012, their Multicultural Leadership Council (MLC) has advised leadership on initiatives to drive social and racial equity within the company.

Environmental Boundary

Climate Change. Many goals to reduce its carbon footprint have been implemented by Coca Cola (2020) to ultimately achieve net zero emissions by 2050 in accordance with the Paris Agreement. Their goal to reduce relative carbon emissions by 25% from 2010 to 2020 was met on target, and their current goal is to reduce absolute GHG emissions 25% by 2030. They have also stated that 85% of emissions comes from the supply chain and have engaged with their suppliers in regards to carbon emissions and climate action to meet this goal.

Chemical Pollution. To combat the growing packaging waste crisis, the World Without Waste initiative was created in 2018 to redesign their packaging to be less wasteful and better for the environment. Many design changes to their bottles, such as 100% recycled PET bottles, resealable caps from 30% recycled plastic, and reusable bottles were introduced in 2020 to advance their packaging goals. As of that year, 90% of packaging is recyclable (towards the goal of 100% by 2025) and 22% of materials used in packaging comes from recycled materials (towards the goal of 50% by 2030). Additionally, Coca-Cola is working to increase recycling capabilities and improve deposit schemes for bottle collection, as 60% of bottles and cans introduced into the market in 2020 were refilled, collected, or recycled.

Despite these efforts, Coca Cola has been named the #1 Top Global Polluter by Break Free From Plastic (2020) with more waste than the next two top global polluters combined. According to the organization, "commitments to make all packaging '100% reusable, recyclable, or compostable by 2025' are already insufficient because they fail to include reduction targets and enable corporations to continue justifying their excessive production of single-use plastics" (p. 31), stating that Coca-Cola has made little progress towards this goal, reportedly increasing the amount of plastic they used between 2018 to 2019. Bea Perez, Coca-Cola's head of sustainability, even said that the company could not eliminate single-use bottles outright as it may alienate customers and ruin sales, stating that "Business won't be in business if we don't accommodate consumers" (Thomas, 2020).

Freshwater Withdrawals. Coca-Cola has committed itself to water stewardship and has set an example for water replenishment leadership. In 2010, they set targets to replenish all water used in drinks and production as well treat all wastewater. In the last six years, they have exceeded their replenishment goal, with 19% improvement in water use from 2010 to 2020 and 170% of water used in 2020 replenished back into water-scarce regions. Partnerships with organizations such as the 2030 Water Resources Group and WWF have fostered water replenishment projects to improve climate resilience, water access, and sustainable agriculture.

Karma Cola

Social Foundation

At the heart of Karma Cola's social impact is the focus on giving back to the community in Sierra Leone where the cola nut, an essential ingredient in their product, is produced. The Karma Foundation was established to uphold this goal, supporting projects that address issues regarding "Governance and Accountability, Health and Wellbeing, Sustainability, Infrastructure, Local Enterprise, Sustainable Livelihoods, and Education" (Karma Cola Foundation, 2018).

Education. Karma Cola has worked extensively to improve the education of their partnered communities in Sierra Leone. According to their Impact Report (2021), the Karma Foundation has sponsored education for over 7,000 children in the Tiwai region of Sierra Leone. As of this year, the foundation has funded salaries for eight school teachers, yearly bursaries for 135 girls to attend school, and the construction of four new schools and three extra classrooms. As a result, more students (especially girls) have been taking and passing secondary school exams and the standards of education in the region have risen.

Social Equity and Income. The Karma Foundation also works to empower local farmers in the region, providing resources for entrepreneurship and enabling economic independence. Not only have they funded the ventures of 60 entrepreneurs and provided 200 farmers with seedling support, but they have funded important local infrastructure projects such as five bridges and two roads. Additionally, Karma Cola has been certified as a Fairtrade organization, meaning that they have met rigorous standards regarding fair pay, safe working conditions, and workers' rights (Fairtrade Foundation). In 2014, Karma Cola was even awarded the title of World's Fairest Trader at the Fairtrade International General Assembly in Bonn, owing to "a strong commitment to Fairtrade and engagement with Fairtrade producers" as well as "giving cola nut farmers in Sierra Leone an international profile and market for a crop that has traditionally been only locally traded" (The Karma Cola Foundation, 2018, p. 61).

Health. Karma Drinks (2021) launched a health fund in 2018 run by an elected local committee that has since provided access to medical treatment for 127 people as well as supported distribution of medicine, masks, and essential health education. Within the soft drink industry there is an additional layer to the health category regarding the health of the product itself. Karma Cola is certified organic (Soil Association), meaning that all of its ingredients are organic and non-artificial, and the drinks are also vegan and come in sugar-free varieties. In its non-sugar free bottles, Karma Cola has a lower sugar content than Coca Cola with 31.7g of sugar per can, according to the nonprofit Ethical Consumer, although this still comprises 35% of sugar GDA for adults (Owens, 2020).

Gender Equality. Much of Karma Cola's contributions towards gender equality exist inherently within its economic and educational initiatives. Among the children funded to attend school include 65 secondary school girls and 68 primary school girls, as of 2019. Through educational and economic empowerment of women, these initiatives help to advance gender equality in the region.

Environmental Boundary

Land Conversion. Karma Cola has partnered with OneTribe, a Climate Action Platform that helps protect trees in the rainforest everytime a purchase is made in addition to planting 25 new trees for each case sold. To date, Karma Cola has protected 17,870 trees and planted 30,000 new trees in the Amazon as a result of this partnership (Karma Drinks, 2021). Additionally, they have partnered with the NGO Welthungerhilfe to resurrect regenerative forest farming in Sierra Leone to protect the forest where the cola nut is harvested so as not to have an impact on land conversion rates.

Climate Change. The initiatives and partnerships to protect rainforests in the Amazon and promote regenerative farming also help to reduce carbon in the atmosphere and fight climate change. OneTribe, the organization that Karma Cola has partnered with to protect rainforests, has stored almost 2.5 million tons of carbon in 2021 and removed over 530,000 car emissions from the atmosphere (OneTribe), although the exact contribution of Karma Cola towards this accomplishment is not stated. Their impact report (2021) also states that “localised canning in NZ reduces carbon emissions” (p. 5), although no further information on this canning process could be found. However, Karma Cola does offer the option of purchasing a carbon offset for \$2.00 from its online store.

Chemical Pollution. The company is certified organic by the Soil Association, meaning their drinks do not contain chemicals often found in other soft drinks, and their ingredients are ethically and organically farmed without adding toxins into the earth. This certification ensures that they are not harming the earth through their production processes. Karma Cola has also worked to remove 1.4 tons of plastic from its supply chain and from its start has used entirely plastic-free bottles (Karma Drinks, 2021).

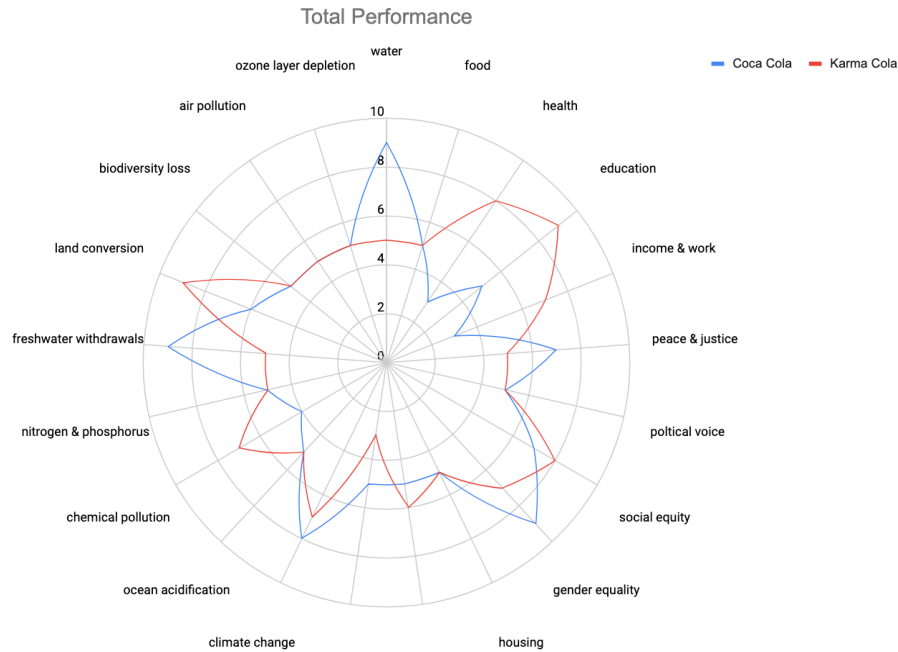
Other Categories

For each business, only the categories with enough information on the topic were included. For each company, several categories had no mention of direct initiatives or progress made, although many of their initiatives likely had indirect impact on these categories by way of greater economic independence or climate resilience. However, these categories were given a neutral score of 5, as direct impact could not easily be measured.

Comparison

Based on the information above, each of the categories of the donut model were given a score from 1 to 10 based on how well they contribute to these challenges. The graph below shows the total performance of these two companies.¹

¹See Table 1 in Appendix.



With regards to the social foundation of the donut, both companies have made great impact; Coca-Cola's achievements of empowering 6 million women entrepreneurs and providing water access to over 6 million people has resulted in vast improvements in gender equality, social equity, economic empowerment, and climate resilience, among others. However, as one of the oldest and largest corporations in the industry, these initiatives were implemented as a result of a global movement towards more sustainable business practices and corporate social responsibility. Because of this, many of these initiatives aim to minimize existing problems within the extensive Coca-Cola network, such as human rights violations, health concerns, and waste production that existed long before the initiatives were introduced.

Karma Cola, in comparison, has advanced these social issues as a core principle of its business since its beginning. Their partnership and initiatives with the Tiwai villages in Sierra Leone demonstrate a dedication to improving the lives of the communities that are important to their business. One percent of profit from sales goes back into the Karma Foundation that supports these social initiatives in Sierra Leone and has contributed to education, infrastructure, and agricultural projects. A company the size of Karma Cola cannot achieve quite the impact of Coca-Cola, for example only 135 girls have been sent to school in comparison to 6 million women empowered by Coca-Cola, but the important relationship with these villages illustrate a dedication to truly doing good rather than just reaching arbitrary goals. Karma Cola was ranked one of the most sustainable soft drink companies, with a 17/20 rating by the nonprofit Ethical Consumer (2020) and even awarded the "Best Corporate Social Responsibility" award by the TVNZ-NZ Marketing Awards (Stoppess Team, 2017).

In terms of environmental contribution, Coca-Cola has shown demonstrable impact with its water replenishment initiatives, carbon emissions goals, and pollution reduction targets. Coca-Cola HBC has been listed in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index as Europe's most sustainable beverage company, included in FTSE4Good's Index Series since 2000, and has been given an A rating by CDP Climate Disclosure for "demonstration of best practices associated with environmental leadership" (Coca-Cola HBC, 2022). However, similar to its social initiatives, environmental improvement has

only been incorporated in response to the necessity of minimizing consequences. As Coca-Cola makes up the largest share of market revenue in the beverage industry it also has the greatest negative environmental impact in terms of resource use, pollution, and other negative environmental effects.

Karma Cola, on the other hand, is a much smaller and newer company and therefore has not had as much of a detrimental environmental impact as Coca-Cola. Benefiting the environment is inherent in the company's founding principles of being good for the people and the earth. Because of this, they have not established many environmental goals such as carbon emissions targets or plastic reduction targets because their products avoid these problems in the first place by being plastic-free, promoting sustainable agriculture, and minimizing their carbon footprint. Their regenerative farming and rainforest protection initiatives demonstrate environmental impact not to meet certain goals but rather to make as positive of an impact as they can.

Business Model Analysis

Following this analysis, we can assess the progress of these companies towards being a 'truly sustainable' business by evaluating their business models using Dyllick and Muff's typology of BST. Coca-Cola dominates the beverage industry; they own over 500 different beverage brands worldwide, are sold in over 200 countries and territories worldwide, and have a global brand value of over \$71 billion (The Coca-Cola Company). This knowledge combined with the analysis above reveals that Coca-Cola's business model is clearly driven by economic growth and shareholder value. According to the BST typology, this would be an example of a BST 2.0 company, categorized by creating value "not just as a side effect of their business activities, but as the result of deliberately defined goals and programs addressed at specific sustainability issues or stakeholders" (Dyllick, T., & Muff, K., 2016, p. 164). The extensive sustainability initiatives are an indicator that they recognize the importance of social and environmental issues and are actively working to combat them, but negative impacts in health and waste production still suggest market revenue as its top priority.

Karma Cola is sold in only 23 countries and is not large enough to constitute a significant portion of the beverage industry market (Karma Cola Foundation, 2018). However, economic, social, and environmental value are all integrated into of Karma Cola's operation, representing a fully integrated business, or BST 3.0, which "looks first at the external environment within which it operates and then asks itself what it can do to help overcome critical challenges that demand the resources and competencies it has at its disposal." By fostering a strong partnership with communities in Sierra Leone responsible for growing the cola nut, they seek to create a positive impact in society as the driving force of its business. 'It's not about 'giving back,' claims the company, 'we don't take in the first place,' embodying the essence of what it means to be a truly sustainable business.

Comparison

Both companies have implemented strong, successful initiatives to make a positive impact in society and the environment, as outlined in the sustainability analysis above. They have also both incorporated elements of circular business and economy, with Coca-Cola developing systems for reuse and recycling of its bottles and Karma Cola putting resources back into aiding the source of their ingredients. The difference in their sustainable business models lies in the ambition behind these initiatives. Karma Cola's intent is to give back to the communities that sustain their business, while Coca-Cola introduced goals relatively recently in its history in an effort to become a more sustainable business. This is seen clearly in the fact that Coca-Cola sets many specific goals and targets for social and environmental progress, whereas Karma Cola works to make as great of an impact as possible in ways that are most needed for their partner communities in Sierra Leone. However, because of the size and influence of the Coca-Cola Company, they are able to make a much greater impact in the lives of millions of people around the world, while Karma Cola has served the same communities

since its founding. The relative size of Karma Cola is definitely a limitation, as its sustainable impact depends on the amount of sales, which pale in comparison to Coca-Cola's sales. Even though the company embodies sustainable business, the lack of significant industry influence means that its practices are not likely to have a noticeable effect on the practices of the soft-drink industry as a whole, whereas Coca-Cola's status as the leader of the beverage industry will likely encourage competitors in the industry to follow suit in any sustainable practices.

Future Recommendations

Karma Cola, despite having noticeable impact in the lives of the communities that support their business, was lacking data in several environmental categories, such as specific measurements for CO₂ production, packaging materials, and water consumption levels. Greater transparency in these fields is essential to being a truly sustainable business and would lead to better recognition as an environmentally sustainable company in addition to its social activism. Furthermore, circular business model strategies could be implemented to better enhance its environmental impact, such as Coca-Cola's concept of a reusable bottle or recycling old cans and bottles into its manufacturing process.

Coca-Cola on the other hand is still in the process of becoming fully sustainable, as economic value is not yet fully integrated with social and environmental values. To make the essential leap, the company can learn from Karma Cola's model of sustainability as an integral part of the business. For example, sustainable packaging and waste reduction should be driven by environmental considerations rather than marketing strategy. Additionally, a more sustainable business would actively work to enhance the lives of the farmers and producers of the ingredients they rely upon.

Conclusion

Coca-Cola and Karma Cola both rank well in the donut model, with Coca-Cola demonstrating impact on a larger scale and reporting greater environmental contributions. Karma Cola, despite lacking specific targets and reporting for certain environmental measurements, is a pioneer in the industry by creating significant social impact in the communities that supply their business. Coca-Cola's business model reflects an incorporation of sustainable practices into their existing model, which matches the BST 2.0 typology that "relates economic, environmental, and social concerns to the triple bottom line values of sustainability" (Dyllick, T., & Muff, K., 2016, p. 164). Karma Cola demonstrates a fully integrated sustainable business model (BST 3.0) where sustainability is the core focus of the business and reflects the mentality of not only how they can contribute to sustainability, but also how sustainability supports the business. Both companies have limitations to their approaches as well, as Coca-Cola's lack of a fully integrative approach still leads to mass waste production and health concerns and Karma Cola's relative size lacks influence in the mass market and society. The difference in their sizes may also have been a limitation in this analysis, as Coca-Cola's external reporting proved to be more extensive and consequently included more criticism and negative findings in areas that would likely go unnoticed in a company like Karma Cola. Further research on these companies using other frameworks or methods of analysis would provide a more comprehensive comparison and add greater insight into the sustainability of the beverage industry.

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Appendix

Table 1: Donut Model Category Evaluations

Category	Coca Cola	Karma Cola
water	9	5
food	5	5
health	3	8
education	5	9
income & work	3	7
peace & justice	7	5
political voice	5	5
social equity	7	8
gender equality	9	7
housing	5	5
networks	5	6
energy	5	3
climate change	8	7
ocean acidification	5	5
chemical pollution	4	7
nitrogen & phosphorus	5	5
freshwater withdrawals	9	5
land conversion	6	9
biodiversity loss	5	5
air pollution	5	5
ozone layer depletion	5	5

