



Series on Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability for Law Firms

Social Impact for a Law Firm: Beyond the basics

A profile of Vieira de Almeida, a Portuguese firm with social impact at its core

By Pamela Cone, Founder & CEO Amity Advisory

Law firms are beginning to exhibit a more comprehensive and holistic approach to how they view social impact and sustainability. When it comes to moving from “transactional” to “transformational,” **Vieira de Almeida (VdA)**, a firm based in Lisbon, Portugal exemplifies a truly transformational approach and has since its inception.

This business approach sets VdA apart as a leading example of what a holistic, robust social impact and sustainability program could (and should) be in law firms today.

Moving corporate social responsibility from transactional to transformational

Most law firms engage in community investment and most have pro bono programs. At many firms, these programs are isolated departments that engage in separate transactions, each focusing on its own “random acts of kindness.” It’s rare to find a firm whose social impact and sustainability programs are truly “transformational.”

When a firm’s program is truly transformational, it clearly represents three attributes in all of its social impact/sustainability initiatives and projects:

- Core to the business – uses highest and best skills of its people
- Consistent with purpose – aligns with and part of the firm’s strategic vision
- Collaborative in nature – works with external parties for greater impact

Vieira de Almeida – Lisbon, Portugal

VdA was founded in 1976. Founding partner Vasco Vieira de Almeida’s mantra still resonates today.” A true lawyer is above all a

Citizen” The firm’s work in support of that mantra is prolific and obvious. VdA is a leading Portuguese law firm with a team of 470 professionals, including more than 300 lawyers working in 19 practice areas. The firm has two offices in Portugal (in Lisbon and Oporto). It also works internationally in 12 jurisdictions through VdA Legal Partners, a network that connects lawyers and independent law firms associated with VdA to provide integrated legal services in both Portuguese and French-speaking Africa, as well as East Timor.

VdA GOT SOCIAL TALENT

Being a leader – beyond expectations

VdA’s corporate social responsibility program is developed around two dimensions: environmental sustainability and social responsibility. “While pro bono and social responsibility initiatives seem to be standard in Anglo-Saxon countries, that’s not the case in Continental Europe,” said Margarida Couto, one of the early members of the firm, and now the partner in charge of its CSR and sustainability program. “My ambition is to set the example to infect other firms with the sense of obligation to address the very challenging issues facing society today. After all, if we don’t step up and lead, who will? This is our moment. To quote our founding partner: A true lawyer is above all a Citizen! We must work to build a more informed, integrated and inclusive society.”

Core to the business—embedded in their client work

In an unprecedented move in Portugal, VdA created a practice group focused on the social economy in 2018, with the goal of creating a specialized and professional response to this sector's specific needs. VdA aims to serve as “agents of change” in the social economy by building capacity of third-sector entities, such as foundations, cooperatives, and nonprofits. Lawyers provide ongoing training that promotes access to information, shares knowledge, and improves legal literacy. This training not only empowers third-sector entities by helping them understand and fulfill their legal obligations, it also equips them with additional and improved tools and resources to more effectively and sustainably carry out their missions.

Collaborating with external parties

With great confidence in the vitality and soundness of its social impact and sustainability programs, VdA is a signing member of the United Nations Global Compact, thus committing to the UNGC's 10 Principles, and contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. VdA has contributed (in an integrated manner and in partnership with other entities) towards the implementation of the SDGs, including in its participation in the SDG Alliance, which currently operates as the Portuguese network's main initiative.

Pro bono—beyond occasional, random cases

True to its founding vision of “Citizens First, Lawyers Second,” VdA encourages the exercise of citizenship within VdA and between VdA

and its partners through its pro bono program.

Focusing its pro bono program on innovation and social entrepreneurship, the firm actively cooperates with several organizations in the social economy sector to build their capacity, such as:

- [Centro Português de Fundações](#)—a non-profit that represents foundations
- [Entrajuda](#)—an association whose core activity is capacity building in the third sector
- [IRIS](#)—an incubator of social innovation projects
- [GRACE](#)—an association representing more than 170 corporations that share CRS as a core concern
- [TrustLaw](#)—a clearing house that connects high-impact NGOs with pro bono lawyers
- [Impact Hub Lisbon](#)—a member of the Global Network of Impact Makers

VdA provides pro bono legal services that strengthen and develop relevant social innovation and social enterprise projects, including:

- [Speak](#)—a project that promotes the integration of foreigners and refugees by sharing experiences
- [Just a Change](#)—a project that changes the lives of families living in a state of housing poverty through (re)construction interventions
- [Teach for Portugal](#)—a member of the Teach for All network, which helps children in disadvantaged communities fulfill their potential through an innovative approach
- [ColorAdd](#)—a social innovator that created a unique, universal, inclusive, and non-discriminative language that enables the color blind to identify colors

These projects help build a more informed, integrated, and inclusive society. At VdA, time spent in pro bono legal services is included in lawyers' annual performance goals, and pro bono hours are treated as billable hours.

Foundation—beyond charitable donations

In 2016, the firm established the Vasco Vieira de Almeida Foundation, which has reinforced and deepened its commitment to the community. The Foundation's mission is aligned with its "Citizens First, Lawyers Second" mantra—to promote human rights and the rule of law through citizenship education and the exchange of values and knowledge. The Foundation's work is promising and exciting, and it actively involves the entire firm. Like the firm's pro bono work, it aims to build a more informed, integrated, and inclusive society.

The Foundation focuses on collaborative networking by partnering with key national and international stakeholders in the social and environmental sectors. Two of the most powerful projects the Foundation supports are:

- [SEMEAR: Terra de Oportunidades \(Land of Opportunities\)](#)—an inclusive social business that improves the employability and socio-professional integration of people with disabilities through certified training and development of hands-on skills in organic agricultural production and processing.
- [Girl MOVE Academy](#)—an advanced program in leadership and social entrepreneurship, which helps Mozambican young women build leadership skills and acquire an entrepreneurial vision in troubleshooting.



(Photo: Patrícia Tauzene's Concert&Talk-Girl Mover who participated in an international Life Internship in VdA, in 2019, in the context of the partnership with Girl MOVE Academy)

Carbon footprint—beyond recycling

While most firms take steps to reduce their carbon footprint through reducing paper use, switching to recyclable products in its kitchens, LED lighting, and composting, very few firms are working to address the biggest contributor to their carbon footprint—air travel.

VdA focuses on all elements of its carbon footprint. It has been measuring and making progress since 2011, when it launched an initiative called VdA's Green Project. The goal of this sustainable development and eco-efficiency program is to minimize the environmental impact of the firm's operations, including its impact from business travel. Environmental concerns are integrated in the firm's business strategy, with a goal to eventually achieve carbon neutral status.

VdA publishes a carbon footprint report, which clearly shows their CO₂ emissions and the progress they are making (or not) since 2011. The categories they assess include: energy, travel, water, paper, and waste. They look at their consumption on a per-employee basis and compare themselves to others via industry benchmarks. And they work with their supply chain to reduce their carbon footprint as well.

VdA is a member of Legal Sustainability Alliance (LSA), an international organization of law firms committed to promoting sustainability. It is also a member of BCSD Portugal, a business association that integrates the worldwide network of the World Business for Sustainable Development (WBCSD).

Living its principles

"We are very proud of our focus on being

Citizens First, Lawyers *Second*, as that made us *true lawyers*. It has made our firm what we are today," said Couto. "However, there is much still to be done. Guiding ourselves with a vision of a more informed, integrated and inclusive society, we will do our utmost to ensure that VdA's CSR program is in constant renewal, always taking care that it successfully rises up to the societal challenges of the future. After all, if not us, then who? If not now, then when?"

About the Author

[Pamela Cone](#) has more than 25 years' experience in the professional services industry in marketing and communications roles, and more recently, building social responsibility programs in collaboration with clients and in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of 2030. She is the Founder and CEO of Amity Advisory, a consultancy to help firms strengthen their CSR programs beyond transactional to achieve truly transformational social impact outcomes.

